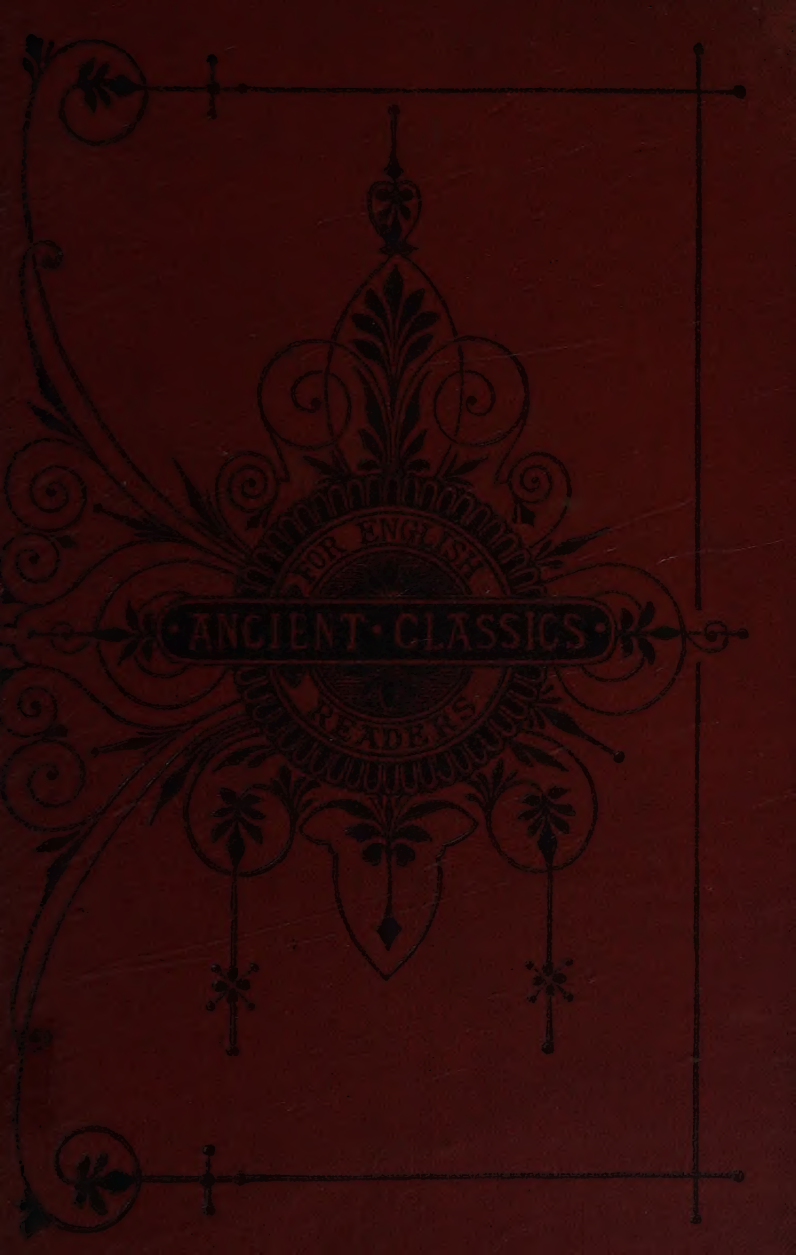
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BY

REGINALD S. COPLESTON, M.A.

FELLOW AND LECTUREK OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

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1. AGAMEMNON.
2. CHOEPHORI, OR LIBATION-BEARERS.
3. EUMENIDES.

NOTE.

No discussion of the numerous points under dispute as to the structure of the theatre, the arrangement of the plays, and the dresses of the actors, has been admitted into this volume; but in each case that view which appeared most probable and most intelligible has been adopted without any expression of uncertainty, and occasionally even the writer's own conjectures have been introduced. But, in truth, the greatest uncertainty prevails on all such points.

The writer desires here to express his thanks to Miss Swanwick and to Professor Plumptre for the courtesy with which they have granted permission to use their translations. To Professor Plumptre's Introduction, Chapter II. is greatly indebted; nor is there any part in which his admirable book has not been of service.

ÆSCHYLUS.

CHAPTER I.

THE FEAST OF BACCHUS.

In order rightly to understand the drama of the Greeks, and especially their tragedy, we must rid ourselves, as far as possible, of those associations which now cling in England round the names of "play" and "theatre." For our modern plays are so unlike a Greek tragedy, and the position which they occupy is so entirely different from that of the Athenian theatre, that the few points which both have in common are more likely to impede than assist us.

The Athenian theatre was a national institution; no private speculation, but the pride and glory of a great people; somewhat like, in this respect, to the celebrated theatres of some of the small German states, such as those of Dresden or Mannheim. It was also a religious institution; not merely a scene of national amusement, but at the same time a solemn ceremony in honour of the god Bacchus. The performances took place only at rare intervals, when the festivals of that

divinity came round, and so were invested with a dignity which cannot attach to our modern theatres, open as these are every day in the year or in the season. And as a consequence of the rarity of the representations, each play was, as a rule, enacted only once.

All these facts—that the theatre was national, and religious, and rarely open—combined to make the audience on each occasion very numerous. It was a point of national pride, of religious duty, and of common prudence on the part of every citizen, not to miss the two great dramatic festivals of the year when their season came. Accordingly, we hear that thirty thousand people used to be present together; and we may infer from this, as well as from other indisputable evidence, the vast size of the theatre itself. The performance took place in the day-time, and lasted nearly all day, for several plays were presented in succession; and the theatre was open to the sky and to the fields, so that when a man looked away from the solemn half-mysterious representation of the legendary glories of his country, his eye would fall on the city itself, with its temples and its harbours, or on the rocky cliffs of Salamis and the sunny islands of the Ægean. Finally, the performance was musical, and so more like an opera than an ordinary play, though we shall see that even this resemblance is little more than superficial.

From these few facts it will probably be clear that we shall do best if we entirely discard our modern notions of a theatre, and start quite afresh in our attempt to understand what a Greek play was like.

We must carry our thoughts back to the boyhood of the world. That expression does not only mean that in years the world once was young and now is older, nor only that once men lived of necessity simple lives, not knowing many sciences, and possessing no steam-engines or telegraphs; it means much more than these — that the tone of mind, the buoyancy, the thoughtlessness, which now are found only in boyhood, were then common, in a great measure, to all periods of life. This is a matter infinitely more important than any outward simplicity of life and manners. Let us see a little more closely what it means. The chief source of seriousness in later times is religion. A series of religions, of speculations about the meaning of life, the future to be expected after death, the system of punishments and rewards,—these have gradually sobered the nations of the civilised world. Secondly, the extension of civilisation itself has made each generation more busy than the last, and has deepened the sense of constant responsibility involved in transactions of commerce, in legal and official relations, and so contributed to take away the thoughtless ease and gaiety which existed in the boyhood of the world. To a Greek, in the early days, there were two serious occupations—war, and commerce or piracy; but both were rather opportunities for enterprise than subjects for anxiety. Religion, to a Greek, consisted in an intense love of all that is beautiful, and a firm belief that every stream and tree and cloud was tenanted by a god. All that for us is mere senseless imagery was for him a reality. In the sound of a

stream he really believed that he heard the sighing or the laughter of a nymph—how should the stream move and speak if it were not so possessed? The clouds gathered and the lightning flashed, not of themselves, or in obedience to laws of nature—of those mysterious powers the Greek had never heard—but simply because some person moved the clouds and hurled the lightning; and this was Zeus, or Jove.

Living thus with no anxieties; surrounded by the constant presence of deities who showed themselves to him through every form of natural beauty; reared on sunny hills amid the olive and the vine, and looking out always on bright bays and islands of the eastern sea; trained in every exercise of health; beautiful in face and person as the gods he believed in,—every Greek was in his measure an Apollo, always young in spirit, and cheerful and strong. The epochs of his simple life were the seasons of seed-time and harvest, of pruning and vintage; and they were marked by rustic ceremonies in honour of the gods of fruit and flowers and corn and wine.

Of all these seasons, those connected with the grape were naturally the merriest and most famous. When the rich clusters were carried home, all the country-side would gather round a rustic altar of Bacchus, at the foot of the warm hills on which the vines grew so richly, and there they danced, and sang, and played games,—simple indeed, but marked by the grace and beauty which seems inseparable from the nature of a Greek. This Bacchus whom they worshipped was not, as he is to us, a statue, or a picture, or a name, but a

real merry boy with a crown of ivy-leaves and a strange power of inspiring wild thoughts in the human breast. His laughing eyes had often peeped through the thick coverts of vines at the village maidens, and stories were told how once he had leapt from his tiger-chariot to win the love of Ariadne. When spring came round, and the last year's wine was opened, there was another festival, even more joyous, and merriment became boisterous as the power of the god made itself felt; and these spring festivals grew to be the chief ones of the year. Many rude games arose, in which the young men contended for a goat,* the victim sacrificed, or for a cup or tripod. One of the sports was to dance upon the slippery changing surface of a skin of wine, and he who kept his footing best carried off the skin of wine for his prize. Another was to sing extemporised songs in honour of the god; and when, in any district, a poetical spirit sprang up, this became a leading feature of the contests. Some particular village, we may suppose, would get famous for the hymns sung yearly at its spring festival, and become the centre of a district: the villagers made themselves a name, and went about to sing at neighbouring feasts; then matches were made up between different companies of singers, or individual poets contended together; and the thing grew until there were organised bands of twelve or more, who danced round the altar of Bacchus singing their hymns in his praise, and ballads describing his birth, and his loves, and his exploits. The first systematis-

* The memory of this custom is probably still preserved in the name of "Tragedy," which means "the goat-song."

ing of this form of entertainment is connected with the name of one Arion of Corinth. In his hands the dithyrambic dance and song (such was the name) became an orderly and solemn ceremony, and as such was kept up for many years in different parts of Greece. The number of the chorus was raised to fifty, and set music and words were composed for it. But it was in Attica, the land of the drama, that the first great addition was made to the simplicity of this chorus. Thespis, an inhabitant of one of the country districts, introduced into the pauses of the choric song a rude dialogue, maintained probably at first by himself on the one hand, and the leader of the singers on the other. This may have been sometimes comic, not much more dignified than the repartees with which our clowns fill up the pauses in a circus; sometimes it consisted of questions and answers concerning some story or exploit of Bacchus or Hercules;—at any rate, it soon grew to more. The actor, for so we must now begin to call him, would narrate, not without explanatory gesture and action, some mythical story, while the chorus would sing from time to time songs in continuation of his tale, or in comment upon it; songs of triumph when a victory was described, of mourning when the action was sad, and at all times of moral and pious reflection upon the dealings of the gods with men.

Such was the earliest form of the Attic tragedy, and much as it was afterwards developed, it never entirely lost this form. To the one actor of Thespis another was soon added, so that there was now a complete

dialogue independent of the chorus; but to anything like the modern system, of many parts, each supported by a separate actor, the Greek tragedy never attained. Three is the largest number of actors employed in any of the plays of Æschylus; so that, although each took more than one part in succession, there could never be more than three speaking characters upon the stage at once, except when, as was often the case, the chorus took part in the action.

The chorus of Thespis had danced upon a raised platform, in the midst of which stood the altar of the god; the introduction of a second actor made an increase of space and means of entrance and exit necessary, and thus the platform grew into the stage. In course of time a separate place was made for the chorus, and called the orchestra, or dancing stage, while the stage proper was left for the actors, and for the chorus when it assumed an actor's part. Further, as there were now two actors exhibiting a story by means of dialogue, each naturally presented a different hero or deity; to make this assumption of character more effective, masks were introduced, and before long great perfection was arrived at in their construction.

From the very first, as we have seen, these choric songs were produced at annual contests during the spring festival of the god of wine; and the same custom was continued when the dialogue had been added to the chorus, and the now developed dramas were presented in succession to compete for an annual prize. Having its origin in the country villages of Attica, this form of poetic contest found its centre in Athens, and the

two spring festivals there became distinguished among the chief solemnities of Greece. When Athens began to take the lead among Grecian states, as she did after the Persian war, while her art and literature, though still only in embryo, were preparing to rise to that eminence which soon afterwards they attained, all that was most solemn in religion, most enthusiastic in national feeling, most beautiful in art, found its expression in the rival dramas which twice in every spring were presented, one after another, in the great theatre of Bacchus to contend for the tragic prize. Foremost among the poets for many years was Æschylus; but there must have been many others who rivalled and sometimes defeated him, and these contributed their share towards the advances which were made in his time by the art. We, to whom a theatre means something so utterly different, can hardly fancy the enthusiasm with which the Athenian citizen, on the great religious day, went into the assembly of his countrymen to see the land's most gifted sons, in grand words decked out with every aid of art and dance and music, rival one another in celebrating the great deeds of gods and kings and heroes, the founders and patrons of the Grecian race. Let us endeavour as far as we may to realise the scene.

At the time of such a festival Athens was crowded. The city always contained a large number of resident foreigners, who lived there for commerce or security, and enjoyed a special legal protection. Then there were a great many passing merchants and sailors, and strangers impelled by one motive or another to visit

the state which was fast becoming the leader of Greece, and many no doubt were brought together by the feast itself. There were the country people of Attica, come in, as it were, from the suburbs ; and lastly, there were the regular inhabitants themselves. A busy, energetic people these were, living half their time at sea or in foreign cities; full of all a sailor's vivacity and vigour and enterprise, yet without the sailor's ignorance and rudeness—their hardihood tempered by the culture which was fast gaining ground, and which this festival did much to foster. We have lively descriptions given us of the hurry and the bustle and the clamour in the docks and marts of this most stirring city; and now all was at its height. The city itself was only just beginning to be beautified with the temples and groves and statues which were afterwards its glory ; but at present, while the heroes of Marathon were still in its streets, it needed no better decoration, and the rough walls and narrow roads spoke still of the haste with which they were built up, after the Athenians had so nobly left their homes to destruction to fight at Salamis for the liberty of Greece. Never has there been a city of which its people might be more justly proud, whether they looked to its past or to its future, than Athens in the days of Æschylus.

But all are tending, early in the day, to the great theatre of Bacchus, under the Acropolis. This sacred citadel stands high above the rest of the city, crowned even now with temples of the gods, and especially of Minerva, the patron goddess. Its south side is a steep precipice of rock, from which the ground slopes

gradually down. Here is the theatre.* The part occupied by the audience is semicircular, and consists of seats rising like steps one above the other, and cut in the solid rock. This vast semicircle is filled already with the mass of citizens, men and women, except in the lower ranges of seats, which are reserved for the magistrates and senators. In the centre a small area is left, on which is a raised platform with the altar of Bacchus upon it; across the front, from end to end of the semicircle, runs a high wall which closes the theatre, and in front of this wall is the stage. The stage is long and narrow;—it runs, that is, across nearly the whole front, but is only deep enough for four or five men to walk abreast—and steps lead down from it into the central area or orchestra; while, parallel to the stage, but on the lower level, run long passages to right and left, by which the chorus may enter or leave the theatre. As, then, we take our seat among the noisy crowd, we see before us, down on the floor of the house, as we should call it, the altar on its raised platform in the orchestra, and beyond it, fronting us, a high columned wall, fashioned perhaps like a temple, with great folding doors in the middle, opening upon the stage. We are going to stay here all day and see piece after piece, and join in approving the verdict of the judges when,

* Some readers may remember the representation of the "Antigone" of Sophocles in London some years ago. The Greek stage and its accessories were all carefully reproduced, and the result is described in the 'Times' of January 3, 1845. The same performance, as afterwards repeated in Edinburgh, forms the subject of one of De Quincey's most instructive papers.

at the end, they award the prize to the play which has been best written, best put on the stage, best acted, sung, and danced, richest in free and patriotic sentiments or hits at the defeated Persians, and most illustrative of the glory of the city.

The sun shines full in the faces of the expectant multitude, but a Greek is not fastidious about weather;—besides, there is a pleasant breeze blowing over us from the sea. And the time is passed in discussion of the probable character of the different plays, and the chances of the competitors. These are not, as we might have expected, the poets whose plays are to be presented, but the rich men who put the several plays upon the stage. A poet is not usually a rich man, and could not of course afford to hire, as he must, a chorus and actors, and get dresses and scenery arranged; left to himself, he could no more bring out his piece than the ordinary composer could bring out an opera. So the plan in Athens was this. The rich men in each tribe were required to contribute out of their wealth to the benefit and amusement of their fellow-citizens. When ships were wanted, the burden of supplying them was laid on the wealthier citizens, to each of whom, or to several clubbed together, the duty of providing a ship was assigned. Similarly, when the festivals were to be supplied with plays, the office of putting a piece on the stage—of furnishing a chorus, as it was called—devolved upon some one very rich citizen, or upon several of moderate wealth who bore the expense between them. The play to be thus provided for was assigned by the magistrates out of those

which the rival poets had sent in. The furnisher of the chorus then collected men who could sing and dance to be trained for the chorus, chose the two or the three actors among whom the parts should be distributed, had scenes painted and dresses hired, and provided whatever else was needed for the due performance of the piece. It was a point of honour to do the whole as liberally and artistically as possible; and an ambitious man would gain popularity by introducing new stage-machinery, new effects in the music, or new inventions for making the gestures of the actors visible and their voices audible throughout the immense building. For it will seem most wonderful, if we consider the case, that any actor could make himself heard by thirty thousand people in the open air; still more that his voice, so elevated as to penetrate through all that multitude, should be able to preserve distinct the various tones of grief or joy, of submission or command. To meet this difficulty the Greeks contrived masks, which enclosed, it seems, the whole head, and were fitted with acoustic arrangements such as are unknown to us, by which the power of the human voice was wonderfully increased. In the same way, in order that the persons of the actors might not appear diminutive from the great distance at which most of the spectators saw them, they were made taller by very thick-soled boots, and broader by the judicious arrangement of their dresses; while the mask, no doubt, rendered the appearance of the head proportionate to this enlarged stature. There were, too, in the building of the wall which formed the back of the

stage, acoustic principles observed, by which those who spoke from the interior—as from within a house or a room—might be heard more distinctly. And improvements in these matters were made from time to time by those to whom the equipment of plays was assigned. So when the names of such and such men are mentioned as probable competitors, it is these furnishers of the chorus who are meant, though the success of any one of them would no doubt be considered the more probable if he had Æschylus or Sophocles for his poet.

On such matters the crowd are now exchanging rumours. Cimon, they say, is rich and liberal, and his play will be put on the stage with every advantage of art and machinery that money can procure, and he has a piece written by a favourite poet; but then Lysias has secured the best dancers, and the great actor is retained by Xenocles. "But after all," says some one, "not much depends upon the actor; he is little more than a mouthpiece; any one who can strike a good attitude and walk with dignity, and who has good lungs, will make an excellent Agamemnon." Some one has heard that the ghost of Clytemnestra is actually to appear and talk; another beats that piece of news by the information that the whole band of the Furies is to be brought upon the stage. With such conversation the time is beguiled till the first play begins; conversation for which topics were never wanting, since the entertainment provided for each festival was quite new, or rather there was always a series of entertainments to be expected, so that the interest of

many "first nights," as it were, was concentrated in a single morning.

But now the contest is to begin. The magistrates and generals have arrived and taken their places in the lowest tier, the senators in the benches just above them; and many have been the remarks made on each as he came in, for in this small city every distinguished man is well known, by sight at least, to all his fellow-citizens. At length the curtain is removed, and the scene in which the action is laid is disclosed to view. Perhaps it is the outside of a temple, whose columned front the wall itself of the theatre may adequately represent; or often it is the front of a royal palace, with the statues of the three great gods standing before the gates; or it is a lonely island, where a hero is to suffer, deserted by his fellow-chiefs; or a wild mountain scene, on whose craggy cliffs Prometheus is to expiate his unlawful kindness to mankind. At the sides are painted views of the country surrounding each scene of action; the neighbouring city, if there be one, is seen upon the left, and on the right are fields or open sea. And all this is executed with consummate skill, and knowledge of perspective, such as even modern scene-painters hardly, perhaps, surpass. In such a scene the two actors appear. Their dress soon makes it clear what characters they represent,* and the first few sentences explain to us sufficiently the posi-

* The dress, however, of the actors was in great measure conventional, following closely that of worshippers in the rites of Bacchus. It was generally gay and bright in colour, and admitted but little distinction between men and women.

tion of affairs. They use no elaborate gestures, and make no attempt to express feeling by changes of countenance—such efforts would be useless in so large a place, even if the face were not hidden by the mask —they stand generally still in solemn dignified attitudes, so as to look very much like coloured statues or figures in a bas-relief; and they utter the sonorous verse in a kind of recitative, yet so distinctly that the words may be accurately heard by all the audience, who would instantly perceive and notice any slip in accent or pronunciation. After perhaps a quarter of an hour, or generally less, the actors, or one of them, retire to set on foot the main action of the piece: then the chorus, if they have not already entered, appear in solemn procession, and take their station in the orchestra to sing. There are usually twelve of them, all dressed alike as old men, or maidens, or soldiers, or as the case may be, and they enter generally three abreast, and form and wheel with the stately regularity of a regiment. They move in time to music, marching or dancing, and sing as they advance a solemn hymn, which dimly prophesies the events that are to come, pointing out their connection with the past, and showing how all the history is ordered by the providence or vengeance of the gods. They are marshalled under a leader who walks in their midst; and if they engage, as sometimes they do, in dialogue with the actor, this leader is their spokesman. As they group themselves round the altar, they still sing their grand mysterious chant, and there from time to time they execute various complicated dances, illustra-

tive of the emotions which their words express. And here a word must be said of this expressive dance.

It seems to be an art entirely lost—so entirely that we now cannot well guess what difference of steps or figures would represent even the most marked difference of feelings; but to the Greeks such variation was most certainly represented. And thus much may be noticed in explanation. The Greeks, in accordance with the general simplicity and natural frankness of their manners, were in the habit of giving much more unreserved expression to their feelings by gesture than is thought among ourselves consistent with dignity or culture; so we may suppose that their eyes became more accustomed to such outward indications than ours are, and their taste was not offended by gestures which to us would seem forced and ridiculous. Further, we must consider the facility with which a conventional system of expressing passion by the dance might become generally recognised, until movements, which originally were only conventionally significant, might appear spontaneous to an eye habituated to their use. Lastly, the notion, so difficult to get rid of, that in dancing there is something trivial and undignified, must be as far as possible discarded; for, to the Athenian, the dances of the chorus were probably among the most impressive, even the most awful, spectacles which ever met his eyes; and if to us dancing seems fit only for merriment and trifling, the cause lies not in our advance in culture, but in our having lost an art or a sensibility.

The relation of the chorus to the rest of a Greek

play may be well learned from Milton's imitation of an Attic tragedy in the "Samson Agonistes;" and as corresponding in many respects to the choral ode, we might instance Gray's "Bard." In a tragedy whose subject was the death of Edward II., that impassioned and mysterious ode in which the punishment of the royal line is dimly prophesied would form a good opening chorus.

The ode comes to an end, and then, with successive periods of dialogue interspersed with more choric odes, the play goes on, till the catastrophe, generally a mournful one, has been effected. Then follow comments upon it from actor and from chorus, and all ends, it may be, with a grand procession, during which the chorus sums up the moral of the whole. In all this there is not much acting, not much that is really what we call dramatic: we have rather a series of *tableaux*, majestic, colossal, statuesque; dialogues or soliloquies intentionally stilted, in order that a certain distance and mystery may attach to them; while, giving tone to it all, and relieving the monotony of the long quiet speeches by comments such as a sensible spectator might be supposed to make, we have the stately dance and chant of the chorus.

One play would probably seldom occupy more than an hour and a half; but often three plays were connected together in one grand whole called a trilogy, somewhat as the several parts of Shakespeare's historical plays are connected; and these were followed by a comic piece by the same poet, which might relieve the seriousness of so much tragedy. Each competitor,

therefore, produced in these cases not one play, but a series of four, and several competitors followed one another throughout the day. Wearisome, dry, unimpassioned, all this may seem to us; but we must remember that to the Greek it meant religious service, literary culture, and the celebration of the national greatness. As he sat in the theatre, the gods of his country looked down approvingly from the Acropolis above, and his fellow-citizens, whom he loved with intense patriotism, were all about him. He might say of the assembly, what an old poet had said of the Ionians gathered for festival at Delos, that you would think them blessed with endless youth, so glorious they were and so blooming; and as the rocks under which he sat re-echoed to the applause of that great assembly, he must indeed have felt the thrill of sympathetic enthusiasm which Plato describes as produced by such occasions.

One word about the mental condition of a people whose masses could take pleasure in such an entertainment. That their culture must in some degree have exceeded our own is evident from a comparison of the plays in which we and they respectively delight. The majority of Englishmen, even among the so-called educated, do not care to see Shakespeare's tragedies; the effort of attention is too great, the beauties too subtle, the plot too simple. Now Shakespeare's plays stand to the Greek drama much as a picture does to a statue. And a picture most men can enjoy, but very few can really appreciate a statue. Shakespeare, then, is too severe for us, and Æschylus is much more

severe than Shakespeare; yet the ordinary Athenian citizen could enjoy Æschylus at the first hearing, and those of the next generation knew his plays almost by heart, and could appreciate the most distant allusion to them. In what lies the reason of their superiority? For that it is in some sense a superiority we cannot but feel. To have lost any power of enjoyment is in some sense a fall; and to have lost the power of enjoying what is simple, to want more piquancy, more excitement, is a fall somewhat like losing the innocence of childhood. The multiplication of our interests has made the ordinary course of life so exciting, that we want something still more violent for our amusements. This is one cause. The other lies in the leisure which the ordinary Athenian possessed, and the literature with which he was imbued. There were so many slaves in Attica, that the free population was but a small minority, and it is with the freemen only that we have to deal. These formed, therefore, virtually an aristocracy, freed, to a great extent, from servile work, so that they were provided with abundant leisure. But from their word for leisure our word "school" is derived, for their unoccupied time was all a time of learning. The great sculptors were already beginning to adorn Athens with the masterpieces which have not since been equalled, and in every man's mouth, as the national literature, were the noble poems of Homer. Against such means of forming a simple and natural taste there were no newspapers, or novels, or waxworks to be set; happily for the Athenians, their books and models were few and good.

Our taste has been spoilt by the multiplication of bad books, bad pictures, and bad statues. To recover the correctness of taste which is natural to a healthy and happy man, we must study from the Greek models, and imbibe insensibly the harmony and grace by which they are distinguished. Æschylus, it is true, does not present the most finished example of tragic art; his works are rather sublime than polished; but they possess a very high degree of beauty and moderation, and are executed on so large a scale that they may bear to dispense with finish. If all Greek art is typified by the statue, those statues which correspond to the plays of Æschylus are colossal. And to gain even a slight knowledge of his poetry is to enrich the mind with a store of beauty which cannot fail to be a joy for ever.

CHAPTER II.

THE SOLDIER-POET.

To us Æschylus is a poet, and a poet he has been to all ages since his own; but to himself he was a soldier, so that when he was to write an epitaph for himself, the one fact which he wished inscribed upon his tomb was this—that the long-haired Persians knew how he could fight. To the men of his own age he was both soldier and poet, and from their stand-point we must try to regard him.

Æschylus was born about the year 525 B. C. at Eleusis, near Athens, a village celebrated for the secret rites of Demeter there performed,—those Eleusinian mysteries which are among the most remarkable institutions that the world has seen. The great goddess of Eleusis, Demeter, or Mother Earth, was one of the most august of the divinities of Greece. She represented the earth in its power and its kindliness; in the conception formed of her, the earth's venerable age and greatness, and the mysterious influence by which she quickens seed and nourishes life, were combined with the genial fertility and rich

healthy fruitfulness of the soil; and so was made up the notion of a goddess, awful from her power, but a kind mother still to men. Eleusis was one of the chief seats of her worship, and thence originated a sort of sacred freemasonry, which was widely spread among the different tribes of Greece. For there were certain secret doctrines which only the initiated might learn, and rites at which only the initiated might assist; and these rites and doctrines, whatever they were, were no formal or trifling thing, but furnished a creed and an interest which raised the initiated, in some degree, to a higher level than his fellow-men. We have no means of guessing what it was that was taught in them. It has been supposed that some vestiges of the true faith, ideas of the unity of God and the immortality of the soul, were kept alive and handed down by these mysteries: however that may be, they were regarded as peculiarly holy, and the place on which the shadow of their solemnity fell could not fail to suggest grand thoughts to a powerful and imaginative mind. It can hardly be merely fanciful to ascribe, in some degree at least, to this influence the delight which Æschylus shows, throughout his extant works, in all that is mysterious and awful, as well as his preference for the more dimly known and ancient of the gods. A boyhood passed in longing to know the meaning of the crowds that constantly were coming to his native village, and of the long processions which sometimes passed through its fields; in wondering at the awestruck look of the men who came out from the sacred place, or in guessing the import of the dim

allusions which he heard from time to time ;—a boyhood so passed must surely give a solemnity and earnestness to the whole nature of the man. And certainly Æschylus, if we may believe his biographers, was from an early age haunted by solemn imaginations, and by a consciousness of the presence of the gods. It is said that he told this story of himself. Once, when quite a child, he was left in a vineyard to guard or watch the grapes, and, tired with the sun, he lay down and slept ; and he saw coming through the rows of vines the flushed face of Bacchus, merry, yet terrible; and Bacchus bade him give himself henceforth to the tragic art. On this anecdote we cannot place much reliance—it sounds like a later fabrication ; but we may well believe that a "fine frenzy" was early seen in the eyes of Æschylus, and that his character was early marked by a fiery earnestness and pride.

He was born of noble family, and in after-years, when he saw changes passing over the society of Athens, by which the prestige of nobility was lowered, and new men were helped to rise to the highest offices in the state, his pride of birth showed itself in a spirit of haughty reserve and stern conservatism. But in this contempt for the rising citizens of his day there was at least one great truth implied ; a truth, that is, very needful for the time in which he lived. Love of moderation and due proportion, and a hatred of the vulgarity of excess—this, the characteristic principle of Greek art in all its branches, was beginning to make itself felt and consciously accepted ; and this is the very principle which new men, in every age, are

most apt to violate. And Æschylus, as a leader in the development of the artistic spirit, could not but be rightly indignant at the arrogance of newly-gotten wealth. To him, as to all true Greeks, such arrogance was a sin against the gods. A man exulting in his great prosperity, and presuming on it, was a sight at which the gods were angry: they would impel such a man to violent deeds, and make his pride the instrument of his destruction. The moderate wealth and well-founded dignity of an ancient family had all charms for Æschylus; he loved all that was venerable, and hated arrogance above all crimes. Of this influence of his noble birth we shall find frequent indications.

But an Athenian citizen, though he might plume himself in private on his birth, would not think of disdaining to mingle on equal terms with the mass of his fellow-citizens in the field and the assembly. In many a stern battle Æschylus fought as readily as any; and his hardihood was not, as with some of our own well-born soldiers, a virtue rarely shown, called out by the occasion, and contrasting strangely with the almost effeminate indolence and luxury of ordinary days. Something of this character appeared afterwards in Alcibiades, but we may be very sure there was none of it in Æschylus. He, like all the Greeks of his day, was hardy and warlike always; more warlike than most, almost fierce perhaps he was; and though he could turn to elegant pursuits,—though he was a courtier and a poet as well as a soldier,—yet this was not to be noticed in him as an exceptional combination. For

an Athenian was expected to be a man of many powers, and not, because he excelled in one thing, therefore to fail in every other: rather, to be excellent was with them to excel in all things to which a free and cultivated man might turn his hand. This point it is which makes Æschylus, as soldier-poet, so remarkable an object for our consideration.

Haste and pressure of business make division of labour necessary among ourselves, and each man must cultivate a specialty; so that if a man should appear who was well qualified for all posts, we should not believe in him; and more than that, we should not find him out. So soon as he showed excellence in one matter, he would be ticketed with that and tied down to it: any attempts in any other subject would be regarded as graceful by-works, but not as likely to lead to high success. Now in Athens there was not so much pressure, there was not so much tyranny of public opinion, and the state was smaller.

Yet, even in that small state, it is matter for our admiration that excellence should have succeeded so uniformly as it did in attracting attention and reward. Æschylus, though holding no high command, was selected, with his two brothers, for the prize of pre-eminent bravery at Marathon, and his brother again won the highest honour in the battle of Salamis. Posterity may well admire the judgment of his contemporaries. No doubt all the Athenians fought well at those two battles, and it must have been hard to assign pre-eminence to any; but we, looking at the writings and history of Æschylus, can be sure that

there was that strength and majestic energy about him, which must have made him do acts worthy of such distinction. And to be distinguished at Marathon was something worth living for. Civilisation, art, and culture, against barbarism, wealth, and numbers; freedom against despotism; Europe against Asia,—no less a strife than this was decided that day. The Greeks came to the encounter with the anxiety of men who were trying a new weapon against an enemy of new powers. They were unused to the vast numbers and imposing equipment of the Persians, and the power of freedom and culture had hardly yet been tried. It would have been impious to distrust such weapons and such a cause, but still it was an anxious crisis. And when it ended in the utter rout of Darius and his innumerable hosts, the triumph was proportionate to that anxiety. Greece was greater that day than any country has ever been since, and on that day Æschylus was among the greatest of Greece. And ten years afterward there came a day, less critical, indeed, but even more splendid, when "ships by thousands lay" off Salamis, and the Athenians led the Greeks to the fullest victory. The Athenians then had sacrificed their homes and the temples of their gods to fight for fellow-countrymen who were ungrateful and remiss; the virtue of one Athenian and the genius of another had made the victory possible; and on this proudest day that Athens ever saw the brother of Æschylus was named as having borne himself the best, and the poet himself was doubtless not far behind.

During the interval between these two battles our poet had produced many plays, and several times won the prize; and a few years after the battle of Salamis he wrote the "Persians," a tragedy founded on that event, and representing the tragical end of Xerxes as brought on him by his overweening confidence and pride. In some other plays as well as in this—in "The Seven against Thebes," for instance, and the "Eumenides"—Æschylus treated political subjects directly or indirectly, and inculcated a conservative policy which should not seek through violence the aggrandisement of the state, nor carelessly change her venerable institutions. But in Athens at that time all was progress. Æschylus had neither the taste nor the opinions which would tend to make a man popular there. Discouraged perhaps by the changes effected in the constitution, piqued at the success of younger men, and, in particular, of Sophocles, and annoyed by a charge of sacrilege which he was supposed to have incurred by disclosing on the stage some details of the Eleusinian mysteries, he left Athens in his old age, never to return.

He retired to the court of Hiero in Syracuse, where he had before been a frequent guest, and there, in the midst of a literary circle, with Pindar, Simonides, and Epicharmus, he passed the remainder of his life. Several plays he wrote during his stay there, and these were probably produced at Athens by the care of his friends. It is likely that his greatest work, the Story of Orestes, was among them. He died at Gela, in Sicily, in the sixty-ninth year of his age. The in-

habitants of Gela gave him a splendid funeral, and inscribed his own epitaph upon his tomb:—

"This tomb the dust of Æschylus doth hide,
Euphorion's son, and fruitful Gela's pride:
How tried his valour Marathon may tell,
And long-haired Medes who know it all too well." *

Not much is known of his life; indeed the few facts mentioned here form the greater part of what we are told, but even these are at least enough to show in what great times he lived, and how wide was the range of his gigantic powers. The character which we should be led by his works and his life to attribute to him is supported by the contemporary testimony of Aristophanes, who caricatures him, but with marked respect, in his comedy of "The Frogs." He is represented there as proud and intolerant, but brave, noble, and dignified; given to big words and long pompous compounds, but not at all as frothy or empty of sound sense; as a sturdy representative of the genuine spirit of tragedy and of all that was best in the old Athenian temper; one of those "hearts of oak who had fought at Marathon," and, like the rest of these, a little slow to follow the times, but made of a solid stuff of which there was too little remaining.

Two things then, in particular, are to be noticed in Æschylus by the modern reader. First, the "many-sidedness" of which we have already spoken, by which he was a soldier-poet; and, secondly, the prominent part

* Translated by Professor Plumptre, to whom this chapter is very largely indebted throughout.

which he played in a very stirring epoch of the world's history. By this prominence he was qualified, on the one hand, to represent his countrymen; on the other, to speak to the common sympathies of mankind. As a genuine Athenian citizen, mixed up in the battles and politics of his city, engaged in providing for Athenian taste, and to no small degree in guiding it, he cannot fail to express most truthfully the significant features of the Athenian mind. And since Athens was in a sense the world—represented the future civilisation against Persia, and was the chief scene of its growth—a citizen of Athens was a citizen of the world, and his character was not only not provincial, but not even transitory. Hence it is that, speaking from the Athenian stage, Æschylus can address men of all ages. Hence it is that his views of life, as well as the passions he represents, have interest for us still; and the pagan creed with which they are connected does not seem to impair their value.

What, then, was his view of life, or did he take any consistent view of life at all? It is possible, perhaps, that men should go through life, as some savages indeed probably do, without any attempt at explanation of the events that occur to them, regarding each as a separate fact, and not comparing them together. This, however, is only possible where there is not only no history, but not even any continuous memory of the past; and a nation like the Athenian, which had enjoyed for centuries a noble literature, could not be in any such case as this. To them the freewill of man and his responsibility, and such questions as these, had

long been suggesting themselves. Was their view of the answer to these questions a cheerful one or the reverse?

All that is bright and sunny, all that savours, as it were, of out-of-doors, seems to belong to the Greek, and cheerfulness, or even thoughtlessness, seems to characterise his temper. He loved light and sought it. Yet even out of this very search comes sadness, for there is not light enough in the world for man's needs.* The inquirer is baffled at every turn, and from that very brightness of his outward life which makes him love light and seek it, he is only led the more to find in the inner meaning of things darkness and mystery, to think the dealings of heaven inscrutable, and to believe in dreadful deities of dim and unknown, even of cruel, powers. So while on the one hand the Greek believed in gods of daylight, as it were, clad with sunny youth like Apollo, or fair like Venus, or wise and kind like Minerva; on the other hand there were Erinnys and Nemesis and the Furies, who pursued the proud or the impious, and Atè, who clung to a man or to a family in punishment of some half-forgotten crime, and led them into an infatuation under which they should incur new guilt and new vengeance. Hence a dark cloud hung over history: it was but the gloomy record of men raised to success and wealth, then waxing insolent and forgetting to give the gods their due, then by the angry gods abandoned to a reprobate hardihood, in which they began a course of crime whose consequences clung to them and their descendants, till some one holier than the rest, by a long

* See Ruskin's Oxford Lectures on Art, Lect. vii.

course of expiation, should win the pardon of heaven, and free his family from the curse. Over each step of this dismal round a deity presided. To the prosperous man came the goddess Insolence, and if he admitted her to his hearth, she led him into sin. Often Atè, who clung to him for some ancestral fault, would send Persuasion to him, to make him open his doors to Insolence. Then he would kill or wrong a man, a brother perhaps, or a father, and the righteous indignation of the spectators of his crime would be embodied in or expressed by Nemesis and the stern Erinnys, and these would never cease to cry for vengeance on him, until the Furies seized the hapless victim, and dragged him to destruction. But when the curse at length is to be removed, then the bright gods come upon the scene: Apollo is the cleanser and the advocate; wise Minerva dictates the decision which sets the suppliant free. So strong was the light and shadow in the Greek creed. Æschylus is prone, perhaps, to dwell in the shadow, but his masterpiece, the "Story of Orestes," exhibits both in a beautiful and consistent whole.

Over these two worlds, as it were, one supreme ruler was dimly apprehended. Through all his mention of numerous deities there is ever in Æschylus a constant reference to one God, by whose will all the principles which govern the life of man have been eternally decreed. Sometimes he is identified with Jove,* but oftener he is vaguely thought of as an unknown God, in whom men may still trust that all is ultimately right.

* Or, as the Greeks call him, Zeus.

We have spoken of two distinct classes of gods; the gloomy deities which belong to the sphere of conscience and moral responsibility, and the cheerful gods of the natural world. This distinction is a just one, but it must not be confounded with another. According to the old mythologies, before Jove became king of heaven, and all the young gods, Apollo and the rest, took their places by his side, the throne of Olympus had been filled by an older race of deities—Cronus, and Oceanus, and Prometheus, and the Titans—who had been exiled at the fall of their dynasty, or bound in prisons and tortures. About these there was something venerable from their age, and something mysterious from the slightness of the knowledge possessed about them. They were therefore favourite subjects with Æschylus, as we shall see in his "Prometheus." But their darkness and mystery was of a different kind from that of Atè and Erinnys.

What, then, in this strange medley is true and permanent? The brightness of the natural world—this is our first and greatest lesson from the Greeks; the deep, dreadful responsibility of man; the possibility of restoration from sin to purity; the overruling providence of a supreme Creator. We shall enjoy Æschylus more if we trace these truths in his poems, and we shall learn how much was good in the pagan creeds, instead of only being disgusted by their falsehood.

CHAPTER III.

PROMETHEUS BOUND.

THE "Prometheus Bound" is probably not the earliest even of the few remaining plays of Æschylus; and yet, for many reasons, it is the fittest of the seven * to begin with, for it is the easiest, the most typical, and the most interesting.

It is, in several respects, as simple as it could be. The interest is undivided, for the one hero is present throughout, and the other persons who appear from time to time are all introduced directly for the sake of their connection with him. The unity which all plays, and indeed all works of art, ought to possess, is generally attained, if at all, by less simple means. The main thread is often lost sight of for a time, and our interest is temporarily engaged in some side-plot, which is only afterwards and indirectly seen to bear upon the main issue; so that the poet's skill is shown in enlisting our sympathies in the separate aims of a number of persons, and yet making all those aims

* Æschylus is said to have written seventy or even a hundred plays, but we have only seven extant.

subservient, in one way or another, to the chief action of the piece. But in the "Prometheus" unity is directly secured by having only one person of predominant influence. There is not much elaborate art, certainly, in this course, nor is a result so attained ever quite as striking as that of the more complicated process, when that is used with great power and is completely successful; but such success is rare indeed. It is too often the case that the surrounding interests, instead of contributing their several currents to the main stream, are only so many drains detracting from it. And so it is that few plays of those written with most elaborate art produce anything like the imposing sense of unity which we gain from the "Prometheus."

In its plot, too, this play is exceedingly simple. If we consider the series of steps by which the catastrophe is brought about in a modern play, the great number of events which take place between the rising of the curtain and its fall, how many people pass through vicissitudes of hope and despair, are married and killed, what a long time often elapses, long enough even for changes to appear in the character of the persons;—if we consider this complexity, and then turn to the plot of the "Prometheus," we shall feel that we are dealing with quite a different kind of composition.

Prometheus is nailed to a rock, and refuses even under this torture to yield to the will of Jove. That is all. Other persons come and speak to him, urge or command him to relent, or threaten him with the result, but only to be repelled in turn. The attitude

of the hero never alters, the issue is never doubtful. This naturally seems to us only a scene out of a longer play—and such, in a sense, it is. It is probably the second part in one of those series of three plays, or trilogies, of which we have one complete specimen in the "Story of Orestes." The first of the three would have exhibited the crime of Prometheus, his stealing the divine fire for men; then came the Prometheus Bound, his punishment; and lastly, Prometheus Freed, his restoration. There were, in that case, three complete pictures, together making one story. We have only one picture left, and it is perhaps the simplest, and certainly the most affecting, of the three.

Another respect in which the play is simple is its scene. From the nature of the story, this remains unchanged throughout, until it is lost in the final convulsion.

Now, to have the attention concentrated on one person, in one set of circumstances, in one place, would of course be most tedious, unless the play were short. And it is, like most of our author's plays, much shorter than even the average of Greek tragedies. It is little more than a *tableau vivant*, exhibiting the punishment and fortitude of Prometheus; a signal instance of that character by which the Attic tragedy is especially distinguished from the modern, of statuesque and colossal simplicity. It is a single statue, not even a group: it is less complicated than the Laocoon: though evidently one of a series, it is complete in itself.

There remains the most important reason why this

play is a good one to begin with — it is much the most universally interesting of the surviving dramas of Æschylus. There is very little in it that is exclusively Greek or Athenian; no allusions, or very few, to historical events or national institutions, so that it is as suitable almost to one place and time as to another. The spectacle of a god suffering for the sake of men, so wonderful a prophecy as it is of the great fact of Christianity, has, for most minds, a strong fascination. Goethe, Shelley, and many others, have tried their hands upon the subject—not, it is true, following the plain story of Æschylus, but each adapting the materials to his own creed. Goethe's work is only a fragment. The "Prometheus Unbound" of Shelley, though it is a poem in many points painful and in many fantastic, yet has many passages which illustrate Æschylus with remarkable clearness. But one thing must always prevent any modern adaptation of the situation from being complete, if it is to avoid being blasphemous. In the Greek play Prometheus represents the cause of man against Zeus, and openly rebels against him. Now, so long as the supreme god is represented as wicked or unjust, such an attitude can be an object of sympathy; but to those who believe in the true God, a rebel against Him cannot be regarded as a friend to men, or be an object of anything but hatred. Hence it is that the nearest parallel to Prometheus which modern literature affords is Satan himself in "Paradise Lost." As a spectacle of indomitable will, not succumbing under torture, and raising to the last a voice of defiance to heaven, Satan is the very coun-

terpart of Prometheus ; but all that wins our sympathy for Prometheus,—his goodness, and gentleness, and love of men—is of course wanting in the character of Satan. Shelley has made his adaptation more complete, and it scarcely escapes the charge of blasphemy. The race of men are represented, in the person of his Prometheus, as always baffled in all desires and aims at good by the tyranny of some cruel power. In Byron's "Cain," this attitude is still more openly assumed, but the person of Cain is not represented as entirely deserving of our sympathy. However, these instances show how favourite a theme this, of mankind suffering in the person of one, has been with later poets.

But we will turn to a pleasanter comparison, and see mankind suffering, not in antagonism but in conscious submission to the will of God. In the oldest of all poems, it may be, in the Book of Job, the same great spectacle of heroic endurance is set before us, and there too the hero represents humanity. Prometheus, after his long suffering, is restored to happiness ; humanity suffers and is restored in his person. So it is, in a much higher sense, with Job. Not only in his physical sufferings and restoration, but in the deeper agony of the moral problem which overpowers him, and the higher elevation of the future to which he looks, Job represents all mankind. In him are answered the angry questions which Shelley and Byron ask. "What means," say they, "this constant baffling of man's best efforts, this universal presence of pain and sin, this obscurity in the ways of God?" These are the questions of humanity in its sufferings,

and in Job is found the answer. As he was restored, mankind will be freed from this pain; as he learned the explanation of God's ways, so will mankind be taught. The resurrection will come, and the latter end of the human race will be blessed abundantly; for, in a higher sense than Job could know of, its "Redeemer liveth, and will stand at the latter day upon the earth."

So Prometheus is the Job of the heathen—their prophecy of Christ; and this gives this drama an interest which no other can possess.

There is one other point which must be mentioned about this play, before we proceed to its actual description. It does not so much give us excitement or instruction, as imprint on our minds a figure. This is somewhat the case with "Hamlet;" it is the case with 'Don Quixote.' We rise from the perusal of such a work enriched with a constant companion: a strongly-marked character, almost a well-defined form, is stored up within our minds. So is it with the "Prometheus." Just as those who have been among the Alps may carry about with them the vivid presence of some solitary height which stands up alone and defiant in the face of heaven, its rough sides beaten by a thousand storms, and the great mountains sinking at its feet,—so those who have studied the "Prometheus" have always in their mind that exhibition of unapproachable greatness and indomitable will.

Now who was this Prometheus? He was one of the Titans of whom we spoke in the last chapter,—of the older race of gods who reigned in Olympus before Jove

and his dynasty came to the throne of heaven. Jove was supposed to have obtained his position by conspiracy against his father Saturn—an impiety in some sort justifiable, because Saturn had dispossessed his father Uranus by means not less outrageous. It is a curious question, What could have led the Greeks to rest the claims of their gods on such foundations?—but we cannot enter upon it here. Jove was aided, of course, in his enterprise, by the gods who, when he had succeeded, found places by his side; and Prometheus, at the first, was one of these. He had always been a pitying friend to the human race, and his mother Themis, or Right, had encouraged him in the hope that the reign of Jove would be beneficial to mankind. His name, Prometheus, means "forethought," and in his love of men is implied the lesson that forethought is the source of all human happiness. Hoping, then, to confer a blessing on mankind, he had helped to raise Zeus to power, at the expense of the old gods, and the Titans, his kindred; but he was disappointed at the result. Zeus entirely neglected mankind, or even sought to depress them more and more, till he should have put an end to the race altogether. To remedy their sad state, Prometheus carried down from heaven by stealth some sparks of fire concealed in a stalk of fennel, that men might learn to forge tools and instruments, and so arts and wealth might arise upon the earth. But to use this element of fire had been the special prerogative of the gods, and they would not have an inferior race strengthened by it; fearing, perhaps, lest, so equipped, mankind might aspire to supplant them

in the empire of heaven. So their wrath was great against Prometheus, and he was regarded as the foe of the gods and the friend of the upstart tribes of men, and Zeus condemned him to be bound upon a peak of Mount Caucasus, there to linger out the long years of eternity; and all the other gods, who enjoyed their prerogatives only through his aid, joined in rejoicing over his fall. Only a few who, like himself, were victims of the tyranny of the new Ruler, were found to sympathise with his troubles.

Supplied with this knowledge, which nearly every citizen of Athens possessed, we may now take our places in the theatre under the Acropolis, and watch the play.

When the great curtain has been removed which hung over the back wall of the stage, the wild scene in which all is to take place is opened to our view. Barren craggy cliffs rise up in front and on one side, while on the other we can see down a great precipice, over lower hills and slopes, marked with the course of mountain streams, to the sunny rippling sea. This spot is a peak of Caucasus, and before we can duly estimate the scene, we must just remember what it meant to an Athenian. To us, mountains are beautiful and picturesque. We see them only in our holidays, and have not to cross them in hardship and famine; but a Greek had no friendly feeling for them. A mountain was to him only a hard cruel place, barren and ugly.* And besides the horror that attached to mountain scenes in general, we must remember that

* See, on the Classical Landscape, Ruskin, Modern Painters, vol. iii.

Caucasus was the very type of all that was most remote, barbarous, inhospitable. It was a place to which no civilised man could ever bear to go; and the vivid representation of its crags must have struck horror into the minds of the spectators, and prepared them for what was to come.

The hero is led upon the scene. He is of more than human stature, and his mask represents a face of unusual dignity; while the calm resignation with which he walks to the scene of his torture contrasts strongly with the violence of those who are dragging him thither. These are two beings of superhuman strength and savage face, to whom Zeus has intrusted the execution of his decree. Their names are Strength and Force, but though their persons are two their office is the same, and one only speaks for both. With them comes the lame god Vulcan, the god of fire, for it is his office to forge the chains and bolts, and to bind the victim. Though it is his own special prerogative which Prometheus has injured, yet Vulcan is reluctant to bind a brother god, and to consign so noble a being to such a wretched fate. He walks somewhat behind the others, his heavy tramp echoing across the theatre.

When they reach the middle of the stage, Strength begins to urge Vulcan to the execution of his task. "We are come," he says, "to this desert spot of Scythia: bind the crafty trickster fast, as the Father bade thee, in adamantine bonds, that he may learn henceforth to submit to the will of Zeus, and cease from his philanthropy." Vulcan acknowledges the duty, and confesses that he durst not disobey the Fa-

ther; but he cannot refrain from expressing his sympathy for Prometheus. "Against my will," he says,

> "I fetter thee against thy will with bonds
> Of bronze that none can loose, to this lone height,
> Where thou shalt know nor voice nor face of man,
> But scorching in the hot blaze of the sun
> Shalt lose thy skin's fair beauty. Thou shalt long
> For starry-mantled night to hide day's sheen,
> For sun to melt the rime of early dawn;
> And evermore the weight of present ill
> Shall wear thee down. Unborn as yet is he
> Who shall release thee: this the fate thou gain'st
> As due reward for thy philanthropy.
> For thou, a god not fearing power of gods,
> In thy transgression gav'st their power to men;
> And therefore on this rock of little ease
> Thou still shalt keep thy watch, nor lying down,
> Nor knowing sleep, nor ever bending knee;
> And many groans and wailings pitiless
> Thy lips shall utter; for the mind of Zeus
> Remains inexorable. Who holds a power
> But newly gained, is ever stern of mood." *

Strength despises this pitifulness, and suggests that Vulcan ought to hate one who had injured him so especially; and when the fire-god pleads the force of kindred and friendship, hints that no course is so painful as to encounter the wrath of Zeus. Vulcan bitterly regrets that his possession of the art of working in metals should have brought on him, instead of any other, so distasteful a task. This leads to a remark

* The translations throughout this play are by Professor Plumptre.

from Strength which, though not so intended, is quite in the spirit of that indignation against the tyranny of Zeus which runs through the whole play. "Every lot," he says, "has some trouble in it, except the throne of heaven: none is free but Zeus." Vulcan proceeds reluctantly to his task; and now the spectators are horrified by the actual sight of the impaling and enchaining of Prometheus; and the sound of the iron hammer rings through the theatre. Strength meantime urges on the work:—

"In thine hands take him. Then with all thy might
Strike with thine hammer; nail him to the rocks.
Vul. The work goes on, I ween, and not in vain.
Str. Strike harder, rivet, give no whit of ease:
A wondrous knack has he to find resource
Even where all might seem to baffle him.
Vul. Lo this his arm is fixed inextricably.
Str. Now rivet thou this other fast. . . . .
Now drive the stern jaw of the adamant wedge
Right through his chest with all the strength thou hast.
Vul. Ah me, Prometheus, for thy woes I groan!
Str. Again, thou'rt loath, and for the foes of Zeus
Thou groanest: take good heed to it, lest thou
Ere long with cause thyself commiserate."

Vulcan begs to be spared these constant exhortations, and is moved angrily to say that the cruel words of Strength are only what might be expected from his savage face. Strength answers,—

"Choose thou the melting mood; but chide not me
For my self-will and wrath and ruthlessness."

And now the work is done; but Strength cannot resist the temptation to stay behind and insult over his victim :—

"Here then wax proud, and stealing what belongs
To the gods, to mortals give it. What can they
Avail to rescue thee from these thy woes?
Falsely the gods have thee Prometheus called,
The god of Forethought: forethought dost thou need
To free thyself from this rare handiwork."

Then the torturers depart, and Prometheus is left alone. The ring of the hammer and the sound of Vulcan's heavy tread have ceased, and for a few moments there is an oppressive silence. While his executioners were at hand, he has not uttered even a groan; but now that they are gone, his grief breaks out, and he appeals to the only companions that are in sight,—the sun, and earth, and rivers, and distant sea. Few scenes are more striking than that of the solitary sufferer in a noble cause, left now to face alone the long years of misery that await him, with no sympathising ear to hear his lamentations. And no translation can do justice to the majestic lines in which his appeal is expressed :—

"Thou firmament of God, and swift-winged winds,
Ye springs of rivers, and of ocean-waves,
Thou smile innumerous!* Mother of us all,
O Earth, and Sun's all-seeing eye, behold,
I pray, what I, a god, from gods endure.
Behold in what foul case
I for ten thousand years

* The reader will be reminded of Keble's fine adaptation of the figure—"The many-twinkling smile of ocean."

Shall struggle in my woe,
In these unseemly chains.
Such doom the new-made Monarch of the Blest
Hath now devised for me.
Woe, woe! the present and th' oncoming pang
I wail, as I search out
The place and hour when end of all these ills
Shall dawn on me at last.
What say I? All too clearly I foresee
The things that come, and nought of pain shall be
By me unlooked for; but I needs must bear
My destiny as best I may, knowing well
The might resistless of Necessity."

"This," he cries, "is all my reward for my goodness to mankind." Suddenly he stops and listens.—"What sound," he cries, "what fragrance is this that floats up to me? Is some one come to enjoy the spectacle of my woes?"

"Ah me! what rustling sounds
Hear I of birds not far?
With the light whirr of wings
The air re-echoeth:
All that draws near to me is cause of fear."

The preceding words had not been more remarkable for dignity than these are for their airy lightness, and for the sudden startled tone which they express. We seem in reading them to see, almost as clearly as the spectators saw upon the stage, the chorus of Ocean-nymphs who now enter, floating in the air, and hovering near the place where Prometheus is bound. Their leader tells him that they are come in friendship, to

show their sympathy, borne by the breeze from their father Ocean's halls, overcoming their maiden modesty in their eagerness to condole with him. They are as indignant as Prometheus is at the tyranny of the new rulers of heaven, and, with the enthusiasm of their sex, are even more open in expressing their indignation; and when Prometheus feels as the bitterest pang the exultation which he knows his sufferings cause to the other gods, and cries that to be buried in the depths of Tartarus, out of sight, though bound in darkness for ever, would be better than their mockery, the Chorus scarcely can believe, they say, that any god but the relentless Zeus could rejoice at such a sight. "He," they say, "will grow more and more tyrannous, till some one overthrows his power at last." "Such a time," says the Titan, endowed as he is with a god's prophetic power, "will come, and Zeus himself will then need my help, for I only know how the plot will be laid, and how he can escape it."

"I know that Zeus is hard,
And keeps the right supremely to himself;
But then, I know, he'll be
Full pliant in his will
When he is thus crushed down.
Then calming down his mood
Of hard and bitter wrath,
He'll hasten unto me,
As I to him shall haste,
For friendship and for peace."

On this the Ocean-nymphs beg to hear the story of his offence, and, painful as it is to go over the sad

tale again, Prometheus consents to tell it. He tells how war arose in heaven, how he had helped Zeus to the throne, and joined him in the overthrow of his own brother Titans. The ingratitude of Zeus suggests a remark which was welcome to Athenian ears—a remark in disparagement of despotism,—

> "For somehow this disease in sovereignty
> Inheres, of never trusting to one's friends."

For when Zeus set his kingdom in order he entirely neglected the wellbeing of mankind, and even designed utterly to obliterate the race. "And I only," says Prometheus, "dared to cross his will, and my present plight is the result." After a few words of sincere sympathy from the Chorus, Prometheus goes on to describe the steps by which he had improved the condition of mortals. Especially he gave them blind hopes, to keep them from dwelling on their fate, and Fire, the mother of all arts. This is his only sin; for this is laid on him a punishment which can have no end except by the will of Zeus. The Chorus would urge him to leave off regrets and seek some remedy for his trouble; but he tells them that the consequences of his act were all well known to him, and that he did it all advisedly. He begs them to descend from their airy place and listen to the rest of his story. So they quickly alight upon the stage, form into rank, and walk down to the orchestra, chanting as they go the words,—

> "Not to unwilling hearers hast thou uttered,
> Prometheus, thy request.

And now with nimble foot abandoning
My swiftly-rushing car,
And the pure æther, path of birds of heaven,
I will draw near this rough and rocky land,
For much do I desire
To hear the tale, full measure, of thy woes."

No sooner have these taken their places in the orchestra than another floating car appears, drawn by a winged gryphon; and in it is borne Oceanus, the father of the nymphs who form the Chorus. He is bound to Prometheus by ties of kindred as well as by respect for his character, and he has come a long journey—from the river which bears his name, the mighty river which encircles the earth—to offer his assistance. He professes earnest friendship, and his professions are sincere; but he is too confident in his advice, and has too little tolerance for what he thinks the folly of Prometheus, to be a much better comforter than the friends of Job. Like them, he reminds the sufferer that it is all his own fault; that the same overbearing pride which he now expresses brought on him originally the wrath of Zeus, and that even now Zeus may hear his words and lay on him far heavier tortures. Prometheus is inclined to suspect the friendship of his visitor, and bids him not endanger himself in his behalf, but take his own advice and keep clear of the wrath of Zeus. Oceanus persists in his offer of help, confident that he can persuade the king of heaven to relax his anger, but still mingles reproaches with his advice, and Prometheus sarcastically rejects it. "Take," he says,

"I pray, no trouble for me: all in vain
Thy trouble, nothing helping, e'en if thou
Shouldst care to take this trouble. Nay, be still;
Keep out of harm's way: sufferer though I be
I would not therefore wish to give my woes
A wider range o'er others. No, not so:
For lo! my mind is wearied with the grief
Of that my kinsman Atlas, who doth stand
In the far west, supporting on his shoulders
The pillars of the earth and heaven, a burden
His arms but ill can hold: I pity too
The giant dweller of Kilikian caves,
Dread portent, with his hundred hands, subdued
By force, the mighty Typhon, who arose
'Gainst all the gods, with sharp and dreadful jaws
Hissing out slaughter, and from out his eyes
There flashed the terrible brightness as of one
Who would make havoc of the might of Zeus.
But the unsleeping dart of Zeus came on him,
Down-swooping thunderbolt that breathes out flame,
Which from his lofty boastings startled him,
For he i' the heart was struck, to ashes burnt,
His strength all thunder-shattered; and he lies
A helpless, powerless carcass, near the strait
Of the great sea, fast pressed beneath the roots
Of ancient Etna, where on the highest peak
Hephæstos sits and smites his iron red-hot,
From whence hereafter streams of fire shall burst,*
Devouring with fierce jaws the golden plains
Of fruitful fair Sikelia. Such the wrath
That Typhon shall belch forth with bursts of storm,
Hot, breathing fire, and unapproachable,

* The words point probably to an eruption, then fresh in men's memories, which had happened B.C. 476.—(P.)

Though burnt and charred by thunderbolts of Zeus.
Not inexperienced art thou, nor dost need
My teaching: save thyself, as thou know'st how;
And I will drink my fortune to the dregs,
Till from his wrath the mind of Zeus shall rest."

Warned by such examples, and finding it impossible to persuade Prometheus, the Ocean-god retires. His four-footed bird is eager, he says, to be in his stall at home, and he sets forth gladly on his return through the blue path of ether.

Prometheus is alone again with the Chorus, who now express their sympathy in a beautiful ode. Tears for his lot, they say, are flowing down their tender cheeks—tears of grief and of indignation at the tyranny of Zeus. All the neighbouring regions mourn for the fall of the stately power of ancient days; the dwellers in holy Asia, and the bold Amazons upon the Colchian coasts, and the savage Scythians, and the warlike natives of the Caucasus,—all mourn in universal sympathy. Then they speak again of the like fate of Atlas, ever groaning under the burden of the world, with whom all nature laments, as with Prometheus.

"And lo! the ocean-billows murmur loud
In one accord with him;
The sea-depths groan, and Hades' swarthy pit
Re-echoeth with the sound,
And fountains of the rivers, flowing clear,
Wail the sad tale of woe."

When the soft sweet accents of this graceful song have died away, there is silence for a space, while we

wait anxiously for the next words of the hero. It is not pride, he says, that keeps him silent, but indignation. He had himself set these young gods on their thrones; that is his bitterest pain—that, and the cruelty shown to men, for whom he had laboured so much. His efforts in behalf of mortals he then describes in a speech as noble for its poetry as it is remarkable for its philosophy. "These woes of men," he begins,—

"List ye to these,—how them, before as babes,
I roused to reason, gave them power to think;
And this I say, not finding fault with men,
But showing my goodwill in all I gave.
But first, though seeing they did not perceive,
And hearing heard not rightly. But, like forms
Of phantom-dreams, throughout their life's whole length
They muddled all at random; did not know
Houses of brick that catch the sunlight's warmth,
Nor yet the work of carpentry. They dwelt
In hollowed holes like swarms of tiny ants
In sunless depths of caverns; and they had
No certain sign of winter, nor of spring
Flower-laden, nor of summer with her fruits.
But without counsel fared their whole life long,
Until I showed the risings of the stars,
And settings hard to recognise. And I
Found Number for them, chief of all the arts,
Groupings of letters, Memory, handmaid true
And mother of the Muses. And I first
Bound in the yoke wild steeds, submissive made
Or to the collar or men's limbs, that so
They might in men's place bear his greatest toils;
And horses, trained to love the rein, I yoked
To chariots, glory of wealth's pride of state;

Nor was it any one but I that found
Sea-crossing, canvas-wingèd cars of ships:
Such rare designs inventing (wretched me!)
For mortal men, I yet have no resource
By which to free myself from this my woe."

He had taught them, too, the arts of healing and of prophecy, and showed them many ways of augury; disclosed to them the earth's stores of metal, and taught them their use; in short, he says, from Forethought came all arts to mortals.

This speech has been closely imitated by Shelley, who has amplified it with many beautiful thoughts; but it has lost in the change its stern simplicity, and gained instead a wonderful richness and voluptuous splendour. Still it explains our author so well that it will not be out of place to subjoin the greater part of it:

"Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes
Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers,
Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth, fadeless blooms,
That they might hide with thin and rainbow wings
The shape of Death; and Love he sent to bind
The disunited tendrils of that vine
Which bears the wine of life, the human heart;
And he tamed fire, which, like some beast of prey,
Most terrible but lovely, played beneath
The frown of man; and tortured to his will
Iron and gold, the slaves and signs of power,
And gems and poisons, and all subtlest forms
Hidden beneath the mountains and the waves.
He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
Which is the measure of the universe;
And Science struck the thrones of earth and heaven,

Which shook, but fell not; and the harmonious mind
Poured itself forth in all-prophetic song;
And music lifted up the listening spirit
Until it walked, exempt from mortal care,
Godlike, o'er the clear billows of sweet sound;
And human hands first mimicked, and then mocked
With moulded limbs more lovely than its own
The human form, till marble grew divine,
And mothers, gazing, drank the love men see
Reflected in their race, behold and perish.
He told the hidden power of herbs and springs,
And Disease drank and slept. Death grew like sleep.
He taught the implicated orbits woven
Of the wide-wandering stars, and how the sun
Changes his lair, and by what secret spell
The pale moon is transformed, when her broad eye
Gazes not on the interlunar sea.
He taught to rule, as life directs the limbs,
The tempest-wingèd chariots of the ocean,
And the Celt knew the Indian. Cities then
Were built, and through their snow-like columns flowed
The warm winds, and the azure æther shone,
And the blue sea and shadowy hills were seen.
Such, the alleviations of his state,
Prometheus gave to man, for which he hangs
Withering in destined pain."

—Shelley: "Prometheus Unbound."

A remarkable dialogue ensues, in which Prometheus intimates that over Zeus himself the inevitable laws of necessity have power, but that in what way they will cross his path may not yet be told, for on the keeping of this secret depends the ultimate liberation of Prometheus himself.

In the beautiful little ode which follows—an ode which Mr Plumptre has translated admirably—the Chorus express a pious fear of the power of Zeus, and dread of the effects of such boldness in speech as Prometheus has displayed. Too great, too hopeless was his endeavour on behalf of men, and grievous is its consequence; an end so different from that happy day on which, as the Ocean-nymphs sadly remember, he led as a bride to his halls their own sister Hesione. Their gentle sympathy has reached its tenderest point, and the soft music, which has held those thirty thousand Athenians enthralled, dies quietly away.

And now a new person comes upon the scene; one who, like Prometheus, is a sufferer under the wrath of heaven, the maiden Io. She wears the form of a heifer, though her face is still a woman's, and in this shape she is driven up and down the world, by the jealousy of Juno, because her beauty, by no fault of hers, had attracted the love of the sovereign of Olympus. Behind her follows a spectral form, the ghost of Argus the many-eyed, who still, though dead, drives her before him through the earth, while a gadfly, with its constant stings, adds to her restlessness. She comes upon the scene lamenting her lot, and calling upon Zeus for an answer to her prayers. Prometheus recognises her at once. "Surely," he says,—

> "Surely I hear the maid by gadfly driven,
> Daughter of Inachos, who warmed the heart
> Of Zeus with love, and now through Here's hate
> Is tried, perforce, with wanderings over-long."

In answer to her surprised inquiries, the hero tells her his name and the cause of his sufferings; and she asks him, as a prophet, what the end of her own wanderings will be. He would at first conceal from her knowledge which could only give her pain, but he yields at last to her request; yet before he proceeds to the prophecy, Io herself, at the request of the Chorus, narrates the history of her past life. When a girl in her father's home, she was visited by frequent dreams which told her of the love of Zeus. Her father Inachus, on hearing of those portents, consulted many times the oracles of Delphi and Dodona, and at last was told to drive her from his doors. Reluctantly he did so; and straightway she became a horned heifer, and the gadfly came to madden her, and the giant herdsman Argus with his innumerable eyes to watch her, and even his death, by the hand of Apollo, failed to free her from his constant pursuit. And so she is driven from land to land. The Chorus bewail her incredible griefs, but Prometheus tells them that the worst is still to hear. She must yet go through the land of the nomad Scythians, and round the Black Sea's coast, to the dwellings of the Chalybes, the inhospitable race who work in iron; and thence, across the starry peaks of Caucasus to the country of the Amazons, and on through many wild regions, to the Bosporus, whose name, meaning Ox-ford, will be derived from her journey. And this is only the beginning of her troubles. Her sufferings are grievous indeed, but death will bring an end to them; for Prometheus there is no respite "till Zeus be hurled out from his

sovereignty." The mention of this possible release occasions a dialogue in which the connection of Io's fate with that of Prometheus is gradually disclosed :—

"*Io.* What! shall Zeus e'er be hurled from his estate?
Prom. 'Twould give thee joy I trow to see that fall.
Io. How should it not, when Zeus so foully wrongs me?
Prom. That this is so thou now may'st hear from me.
Io. Who then shall strip him of his sovereign power?
Prom. Himself shall do it by his own rash plans.
Io. But how?—tell this, unless it bringeth harm.
Prom. He shall wed one for whom one day he'll grieve.
Io. Heaven-born or mortal? tell, if tell thou may'st.
Prom. Why ask'st thou who? I may not tell thee that.
Io. Shall his bride hurl him from his throne of might?
Prom. Yea; she shall bear child mightier than his sire.
Io. Has he no way to turn aside that doom?
Prom. No, none, unless I from my bonds be loosed.
Io. Who then shall loose thee 'gainst the will of Zeus?
Prom. It must be one of thy posterity.
Io. What! shall a child of mine free thee from ills?
Prom. Yea, the third generation after ten."

Thus mysteriously is it foretold how Hercules, the thirteenth from Io, should be the means of Prometheus's freedom. Prometheus goes on, at the earnest request of Io herself and of the Chorus, to tell the rest of her wanderings and the manner of his own release. Through many strange countries she is to pass, and see many monsters—the three Graiæ, with the shapes of swans, and only one eye and one tooth between them; the three Gorgons, their sisters; the one-eyed Arimaspians who dwell by the ford of Pluto; and at last, passing the Ethiopians, she is to come to the land of

the Nile. There her descendants will found a colony. At this point Prometheus bitterly says: "If any of this is not clear, ask, and I will repeat it; I have far more leisure than I like." To confirm his prophecy he tells her what her past wanderings have been; how she visited Dodona, and how she gave a name to the Ionian Sea. Then, passing on to the prophecy of his own release, he tells her that in Canopus, at the mouth of the Nile, a child Epaphus shall be born to her; from him in the fifth generation shall spring those fifty maidens who, in flight from wedlock with their fifty cousins, are to seek the land of Argos, and there each bride slay her husband, except one, who shall "prefer to be known as weak rather than murderous," and shall save her husband alive. From them will spring Hercules, whose arrows will slay the eagle which devours Prometheus, and set him free. So much and no more he will tell.

Immediately his prophecies about Io begin to accomplish themselves. The frenzy which the gadfly's bite inspires seizes on her afresh, and in a wild agony she rushes forth to renew her wanderings through the earth. The music of the Chorus is now heard again, and dancing slowly and sadly round the altar, they chant their reflections on the fate of Io; deprecating for themselves any ill-matched love, such as Io received from Zeus; praising the propitious and temperate union of equals, and condemning—this is quite Æschylean—any desire on the part of the working man for wedlock with the rich or the high-born. Such are the thoughts which Io's suffering suggests to these maidens; above all, they dread any collision with the will of Zeus.

All that has passed—the yielding of Vulcan, the caution of Oceanus, the misery of Io—has contributed to increase in our minds the estimate of the irresistible power of Zeus, and so prepare us to admire the more the heroic resistance of Prometheus. A stronger trial of his determination is still to come. In tremendous words he foretells the certain fall of Zeus; he defies his thunders, and thinks rather how a stronger weapon than the thunder will some day be found; more violently still he asserts his certain ruin, and even now exults in its anticipation. His words have been heard in heaven. Mercury, the messenger of the gods, approaches, and bears a solemn message to the haughty Titan. The father of heaven commands that Prometheus should disclose all the details of the danger which his words have threatened. At once, and without hesitation, the answer must be given. And the answer is this:—

"Stately of utterance, full of haughtiness
Thy speech, as fits a messenger of gods.
Ye yet are young in your new rule, and think
To dwell in painless towers. Have I not
Seen those two rulers driven forth from thence?
And now the third, who reigneth, shall I see
In basest quickest fall. Seem I to thee
To shrink and quail before these new-made gods?
Far, very far from that am I. But thou,
Track once again the path by which thou camest;
Thou shalt learn nought of what thou askest me."

Mercury threatens the extremest fury of heaven's wrath, and would persuade Prometheus not, by his

stubbornness, to incur such tortures. Taunting him with his youth and his menial service as messenger of Zeus, Prometheus openly defies the king of heaven :—

> "Let then the blazing levin-flash be hurled ;
> With white-winged snowstorm and with earth-born thunders
> Let him disturb and trouble all that is ;
> Nought of these things shall force me to declare
> Whose hand shall drive him from his sovereignty."

Warning the stubborn hero of the storm and earthquake which presently will crush and bury him, and of the eagle who will then be sent to feed constantly upon his living flesh, Mercury departs, assuring him that of this suffering there will be no end, until some god shall be willing to suffer for him and go for his sake to Hades and gloomy Tartarus. This was done, according to the legend, by Cheiron ; a strange foreshadowing, as Mr Plumptre says, of the mystery of the Atonement. But of this restoration we see nothing in this play ; the rest is all darkness, and terror, and storm, through which the grand figure of Prometheus stands out with a majesty which has certainly not been surpassed in poetry. The heroism of the Ocean-nymphs, who will not leave him in this terrible hour, is only what the neighbourhood of his own heroism required. In ordinary levels of daring their conduct would be very noble ; here it attracts only a passing thought of pity : great tragic characters always carry others down in their fall. But the whole of this final passage is so inimitably sublime, even in a translation, that we cannot say another word which might mar its effect :—

" *Prom.* To me who knew it all
He hath this message borne ;
And that a foe from foes
Should suffer is not strange.
Therefore on me be hurled
The sharp-edged wreath of fire ;
And let heaven's vault be stirred
With thunder and the blasts
Of fiercest winds ; and earth
From its foundations strong,
E'en to its deepest roots,
Let storm-winds make to rock ;
And let them heap the waves
Of ocean's rugged surge
Up to the regions high,
Where move the stars of heaven ;
And to dark Tartaros
Let him my carcass hurl,
With mighty blasts of force ;
Yet me he shall not slay.

Merc. Such words and thoughts from one
Brain-stricken we may hear.
What space divides his state
From frenzy ? what repose
Hath he from maddened rage ?
But ye who pitying stand
And share his bitter griefs,
Quickly from hence depart,
Lest the relentless roar
Of thunder stun your soul.

Chorus. With other words attempt
To counsel and persuade,
And I will hear ; for now
Thou hast this word thrust in
That we may never hear.

How dost thou bid me train
My soul to baseness vile?
With him I will endure
Whatever is decreed.
Traitors I've learnt to hate;
Nor is there any plague
That more than this I loathe.

Merc. Nay, then, remember ye
What now I say, nor blame
Your fortune; never say
That Zeus has cast you down
With evil not foreseen.
Not so; ye cast yourselves:
For now with open eyes,
Not taken unawares,
In Atè's endless net
Ye shall entangled be
By folly of your own.

[*A pause, and then flashes of lightning and peals of thunder.*

Prom. Yea, now in very deed,
No more in word alone,
The earth shakes to and fro,
And the loud thunder's voice
Bellows hard by, and blaze
The flashing levin fires;
And tempests whirl the dust,
And gusts of all wild winds
On one another leap
In wild conflicting blasts,
And sky with sea is blent:
Such is the storm from Zeus
That comes as working fear,
In utter chaos whirled
In terrors manifest.

O mother venerable!
O Æther! rolling round
The common light of all,
See ye what wrongs I bear?"

During all this the storm and the thunder have been increasing, till at last the earth is opened, and Prometheus, with the rock to which he is chained, sinks into the abyss.

Our first feeling is one of indignation against Zeus, but it is not altogether the right feeling. His triumph is, after all, in accordance with the great moral laws by which, according to Æschylus, the world is governed. We, with our better morality, cannot help sympathising with Prometheus more than perhaps the poet did: we love him for his love of men, and admire his courage and high spirit. But this is partly because we do not believe in Zeus. Æschylus called that high spirit arrogance; and arrogance or excess, wherever it is found, must always appear a crime to the Greek and the artist. When a good man is murdered in the midst of excessive prosperity, we must tremble, but we cannot complain; and the divine justice will assert itself in taking vengeance on his murderer. So we must feel here rather awe than indignation, and be confident in the ultimate restoration of Prometheus, and his reconciliation with the lord of heaven. Such, at least, is the Æschylean estimate of the hero's fate; and probably, if we could see it worked out in the preceding and following plays, which have unhappily been lost, we should find it not so altogether alien from our own.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SUPPLIANTS; OR, THE CHILDREN OF IO.

This play takes its name, as many do, from the persons who form its chorus. In this case these are the principal characters in the drama; they are the "Suppliants" whose supplication is the subject of the piece.

We have seen in the "Prometheus" the unhappy Io wandering through the world, and we have heard there the prophecy of the end which was to be set to her troubles; how she should come at last to Egypt, and there bear a son, Epaphus—"the Touch-born"—begotten by the touch of Zeus, whose descendants should form a colony at Canopus. In the fourth generation arose Belus, king of this race of exiles, and to him were born two sons, Danaus and Ægyptus. Danaus had fifty daughters, and his brother had fifty sons; and these desired to take their cousins for their wives. The maidens, horrified at the proposal, but unable, even with their aged father's help, to resist the determination of fifty men, took flight, with Danaus himself to lead them, to Argos, the cradle of their race, the home of Io. Argos was the chief city of the

Pelasgians who then dwelt in Greece, and from their king Pelasgus the maidens sought protection. Their prayer and its success constitute the simple plot of the drama.

The legend may possibly strike us as absurd, and in particular the obvious improbability of the numbers of the cousins may seem to indicate a childish credulity in those who could receive it. It is something like the story of St Ursula and her eleven thousand companions, whose bones are still shown at Cologne; one of the most improbable of medieval legends, and the offspring of a time when there was neither power nor inclination to distinguish between what was proved and what was incapable of proof. But the Danaids are not to be classed with the martyrs of Cologne, nor the keen, travelled Athenian with the credulous medieval. Rather the obvious improbability in the Greek story is entirely in keeping with the spirit of Attic tragedy, which did not, as modern dramas do, aim at imitating the actual life of men, at being probable or like the truth, but set forth an ideal picture of a life apart from and above the real, whose impressiveness was due in great measure to its being far removed from reality.* In a colossal statue, to repeat the old comparison, it is right to represent hair and dress only conventionally, to make the locks of hair and the folds of dress all large and regular—regularity giving grandeur, and literal truth not being here desirable; so, in the tragedy before us, the large and

* See, on this subject, De Quincey's admirable essays on the Greek tragedy.

equal numbers of the cousins contribute to the solemnity and greatness of the whole, while the improbability increases that separation from the actual world, by which an event, in itself not heroic, is raised to the level of the ideal.* This consideration is necessary to a due appreciation of the poetical value of the plot, and is not at all invalidated by the fact that Æschylus only used the story as he found it. Had it been other than it was, he would probably have modified it; but if it had been other, it would not have been Greek. The story of Io was well fitted to interest an Athenian audience for two reasons: because it gave opportunity for the romance of geography in general, and because it was connected with Egypt. The naval enterprise of the Athenians had of late been greatly developed, and they were becoming by this time acquainted with many distant countries; and an interest in geography was spread even among those who had stayed at home; while yet knowledge had not advanced far enough to remove the halo which the dimness of distance throws around strange lands, or to destroy the notion that far-off countries contained wonders and monsters innumerable. Something similar was the case in England in the great times of discovery, when the Plymouth sailor told the boy Raleigh endless stories of the Great Cham and Prester John, or the wondrous wealth of El Dorado. But of all wonderful lands of monsters,

* This consideration, however, will not excuse the monstrous fable of St Ursula, in which the numbers are so exaggerated as far to pass the boundary which separates the sublime from the ridiculous.

the most wonderful was Egypt. There was no good or strange thing which was not supposed by the Athenians of that day to have come from Egypt. The gods of Greece, the letters, the philosophy, all inventions and all history, were popularly derived from the country of the miraculous Nile; and to explore Egypt was the great object of the traveller's ambition. Among the experiences of Herodotus his Egyptian researches occupy a prominent place; and any story which the priests chose to tell him about their animals or their gods, or their endless genealogies, was eagerly accepted. In the light of this fact we see why Æschylus dwelt so much in the "Prometheus" on the wanderings of Io, and traced her finally to Egypt; and we are ready to appreciate the interest with which a chorus of Egyptian girls, in the dress and character of their country, would be received on the Athenian stage. Of these there were of course fifty, as the story required; but as the usual number of the chorus was twelve, we must imagine twelve only of the Danaids as singing and dancing, while the rest remained silent, and probably were disposed in a group behind the actual chorus.*

With the entrance of these fifty Danaids the play begins. Slowly they march, with audible tramp, to the sound of their own chanting, appealing as they go to Zeus, the god of suppliants, for the protection which he especially owes them as the founder of their race. They describe in few words the causes of their flight,

* If this was part of a trilogy, the choruses of all four plays perhaps appeared here, as at the end of the "Eumenides."

and pray that their pursuers may be overwhelmed in the sea, and never reach the shores of Argos. And now they have reached the orchestra, and dividing into ranks and companies, they range themselves about the altar, there to sing, no longer to the music of a march, but in more varied strains, their prayers and lamentations. Just as Prometheus compares his sufferings with those of Atlas and Typhon, so these maidens compare themselves to Tereus' bride, the piteous nightingale:—

"As she, driven back from wonted haunts and streams,
Mourns with a strange new plaint,
And takes her son's death as the theme of song,
How he at her hand died,
Meeting with evil wrath unmotherly;
E'en so do I, to wailing all o'ergiven,
In plaintive music of Ionian mood,
Vex the soft cheek on Neilos' banks that bloomed,
And heart that bursts in tears,
And pluck the flower of lamentations loud."

In their appeals to Zeus, here and throughout the play, the suppliants assert the sublimest truths about the one supreme God. The mystery that shrouds His ways and the certainty of His justice are their favourite themes:—

"For dark and shadowed o'er
The pathways of the counsels of His heart,
And difficult to see.

And from high towering hopes He hurleth down
To utter doom the heir of mortal birth:

Yet sets He in array
No forces violent;
All that God works is effortless and calm:
Seated on loftiest throne,
Thence, though we know not how,
He works His perfect will."

There is much in these songs of the Chorus that reminds us of the Hebrew poetry. They exhibit the same intermingling of general statements about the ways of God and the nature of man with particular applications to the immediate occasion, while their form closely resembles the "parallel" structure of the Jewish writings. The Chorus is divided into two bands, which answer one another in strophe and antistrophe. One band sings a stanza, and then rests while the other, in a corresponding stanza, utters a somewhat similar sentiment, repeating sometimes the same words, and always using the same metre, music, and measure of the dance. And in the "Suppliants" these points are particularly noticeable, for the chorus predominates here more than in any other of our poet's dramas. Hence it has been thought to be one of his earliest, written when the dialogue had not yet acquired its full prominence on the stage; and even if other evidence makes this doubtful, yet certainly we have in this play a return to the older style.

But the long choric song comes to an end; and now Danaus, who has hitherto been waiting in suppliant posture at the foot of the statues of the gods which stand upon the stage, addresses his daughters, and calls them to come and take a position near him, within the

place of sanctuary. For a host, he says, is approaching; and whether their coming be friendly or hostile, it is well to await it under the immediate protection of the gods. He warns them, too, how to bear themselves towards the strangers; to tell their tale simply and modestly;

> "And be not prompt to speak
> Nor full of words; the race that dwelleth here
> Of this is very jealous: and be mindful
> Much to concede; a fugitive thou art,
> A stranger and in want, and 'tis not meet
> That those in low estate high words should speak."

Then they all ascend to the stage, and group themselves there under the statues which decorate the temple front. The scene is a striking one. Their limbs are dark, and their robes and veils are chiefly white, though varied with rich embroidery of gold and purple, and in their hands they bear branches of myrtle wreathed about with festoons of white wool, the well-known badge of the suppliant; and as the sunshine streams in upon them, with contrast of bright light and deep shadow, the whole group stands out in intense relief of black and white, with a strange and fascinating distinctness. At their father's bidding they offer prayers to each of the great gods in turn, those "gods of contest" who presided over the great games of Greece, to Zeus, Apollo, Neptune or Poseidon, and to Hermes or Mercury, the herald and guide. These prayers are scarcely completed when the king Pelasgus, with his chariot and his train, comes on the scene. "Whence," he asks, "is this strange company,

whose dress proves them of no Grecian race? How has a band of helpless women, without guide or herald, ventured to our shores?" In return the maidens ask to whom they speak, whether to a citizen, a herald, or a prince. Pelasgus unfolds his name, and boasts the greatness of his kingdom; and tells how it gained its name of the Apian land from Apis, a physician-prophet of old, who had cleared the region of the dragons and monsters by which it had been infested. Finally he asks them to tell their story, and to tell it shortly. That they are of Argive ancestry he will not at first believe, for they resemble more, he says, the Egyptians or the Cyprians, or Indians who ride on camels, or the hateful Amazons; but in the course of a series of short leading questions and suggestive answers their true connection with Argos is explained.

On hearing the causes of the maidens' flight, the king is reluctant to incur, as he must by protecting them, the dangers of a war with Ægyptus and his sons; while, on the other hand, he fears the anger of the gods if he should neglect the sacred claim of the suppliants. And so he trembles when he sees the branches and the woollen fillets with which the shrines are decked. But religion is to prevail over fear. The two bands of the Chorus sing each in turn an appeal to his piety and generosity, and after each the king replies. At first he only expresses his hope that no evil may come upon his land through their request; then he reminds them that it is for the whole state, not for himself alone, to answer them; soon he acknowledges that he cannot willingly consent to

reject them. The appeal is continued. The king urges objections. "What if the suitors have some legal claim upon them? What if his people condemn his clemency, and say that he prefers the interest of foreigners to that of his own subjects?" But it gradually becomes evident that his inclination is to yield, so terrible is the risk of provoking the suppliants' god. Loss of wealth may be repaired by Zeus the giver; malicious words, if the people were offended, a soft answer might appease; but if he should incur, for himself and his people, any stain from the blood of suppliants abandoned, and those suppliants, too, a kindred race, that pollution many sacrifices could scarcely expiate. One more argument remains, a threat so horrible that it is only dimly and gradually unfolded. If Pelasgus refuses their request, the desperate maidens will destroy themselves at the very shrines of the gods, will hang themselves by their girdles to the statues, and so lay the whole land under an intolerable pollution. Pelasgus resists no longer. "Lo then!" he says—

"Lo then! in many ways sore troubles come.
A host of evils rushes like a flood;
A sea of woe none traverse, bottomless,
This have I entered; haven is there none,
For if I fail to do this work for you,
Thou tellest of defilement unsurpassed;
And if for thee against Ægyptos' sons,
Thy kindred, I before my city's walls
In conflict stand, how can there fail to be
A bitter loss, to stain the earth with blood
Of man for woman's sake? And yet I needs

Must fear the wrath of Zeus, the suppliant's god ;
That dread is mightiest with the sons of men.
Thou then, O aged father of these maidens,
Taking forthwith these branches in thine arms,
Lay them on other altars of the gods
Our country worships, that the citizens
May all behold this token of thy coming ;
And about me let no rash speech be dropped,
For 'tis a people prompt to blame their rulers.
And then perchance some one, beholding them
And pitying, may wax wrathful 'gainst the outrage
Of that male troop, and with more kindly will
The people look on you ; for evermore
All men wish well unto the weaker side."

Danaus expresses the thanks of his daughters, and goes forth, attended by an escort given him by the king, to seek the other altars and appear as a public suppliant before the citizens. Meanwhile the Chorus are bidden to leave the shrine, and await in a neighbouring glade their father's return. Being thus removed from the consecrated spot, in which they were safe at least for the time, they begin to mistrust the goodwill of the king, and think themselves betrayed; but he reassures them thus :—

" Nay, no long time thy sire will leave thee lorn ;
And I, all people of the land convening,
Will the great mass persuade to kindly words ;
And I will teach thy father what to say.
Wherefore remain, and ask our country's gods,
With suppliant prayers, to grant thy soul's desire ;
And I will go in furtherance of thy wish :
Sweet Suasion follow us, and Fortune good."

The opening of their new supplication is striking. They appeal to Zeus by his old love for Io, their mother:—

Strophe.

"O King of kings, and blest
Above all blessed ones,
And power most mighty of the mightiest!
O Zeus, of high estate!
Hear thou and grant our prayer!
Drive thou far off the wantonness of men,
The pride thou hatest sore,
And in the pool of darkling purple hue
Plunge thou the woe that comes in swarthy barque."

Antistrophe.

"Look on the women's cause;
Recall the ancient tale
Of one whom thou didst love in time of old,
The mother of our race:
Remember it, O thou
Who didst on Io lay thy mystic touch.
We boast that we are come
Of consecrated land the habitants,
And from this land by lineage high descended."

There follows a description of Io's life and wanderings, with the same fulness of geographical learning which we have noticed before, and the same revelling in euphonious and romantic names. The origin of the Egyptian settlement is told again; and the ode ends with another solemn acknowledgment of the greatness of Zeus, such as might almost come from the Book of Psalms itself:—

Strophe.

"Which of the gods could I with right invoke
As doing juster deeds?
He is our father, author of our life,
The king whose right hand worketh all his will,
Our line's great author, in his counsels deep
Recording things of old,
Directing all his plans, the great work-master Zeus."

Antistrophe.

"For not as subject sitting 'neath the sway
Of strength above his own,
Reigns he subordinate to mightier powers;
Nor does he pay his homage from below
While one sits throned in majesty above;
Act is for him as speech,
To hasten what his teeming mind resolves."

And now Danaus returns to say that the people have decided, and his eager hearers learn with joy that the decree is entirely in their favour. In full assembly, the air rustling with the eager raising of their hands—the sound which the Athenians knew so well in their own popular assemblies—all have unanimously assented to the reception of the strangers. Full rights and protection are accorded them, and any citizen who should refuse them his assistance, in case of any assault from their enemies, is declared degraded and outlawed. "All this," says Danaus, "the Pelasgians have decreed; but it all comes from Zeus." With pious gratitude the successful suppliants chant,—

"Come, then, come, let us speak for Argives
Prayers that are good for good deeds done;

Zeus, who o'er all strangers watches,
May he see with his praise and favour
The praise that comes from the lips of strangers,
And guide in all to a faultless issue."

The prayer that follows must have been, as a poetical and musical masterpiece, the most interesting portion of the play. We can well imagine, remembering the prayers in some of the most beautiful modern operas, what a hush of admiration must have come over the great theatre when its solemn stanzas were chanted. And if, as some suppose, the play had a political character, and was intended to promote goodwill towards Argos, and advocate an alliance with that city, a double interest must have attached to this chorus. "Never may war," such is the burden of the strain, "reap his sad crop in these fields of the merciful and pious; nor ever pestilence nor civil strife strew them with native blood: but let old piety ever dwell here, and the favour of heaven make the earth fruitful with corn and herds; and may songs of joy rise ever here from holy lips."

Strophe.

"And may the rule in which the people share
Keep the State's functions as in perfect peace,
E'en that which sways the crowd,
Which sways the commonwealth
By counsels wise and good;
And to the strangers and the sojourners
May they grant rights that rest on compacts sure,
Ere war is roused to arms
So that no trouble come!"

Antistrophe.

"And the great gods who o'er this country watch,
May they adore them in the land they guard,
With rites of sacrifice
And troops with laurel-boughs,
As did our sires of old!
For thus to honour those who gave us life,
This stands as one of three great laws* on high,
Written as fixed and firm,
The laws of right revered."

When these prayers are ended their father warns them that he has serious tidings to announce, and begs them not to fear. From his high position he can see the ship which brings their pursuers; and as he speaks it becomes more and more clearly visible, till the sails are furled, and the vessel approaches the shore with oars alone. Danaus encourages his daughters to be confident in the protection promised them, and to be sure that the vengeance of heaven will follow their persecutors. In short broken strains the Chorus express their fears and their abhorrence of the sons of Ægyptus, who regard not the gods of sanctuary, and may have recourse to violence before Pelasgus has had time to succour his suppliants. "There is yet time enough," the father replies, "to rouse the Argives: to anchor in a harbourless country and to get ashore is not the work of a moment, especially when night, as now, is drawing on; and we must not

* The "three great laws" were those ascribed to Triptolemus: To honour parents, to worship the gods with the fruits of the earth, to hurt neither man nor beast."

distrust the gods, to whom we have appealed." And so he goes away to arouse the city, and the Chorus are left alone. Fain would they find a hiding-place, but there is none. Fain would they be like the smoke that rises up into the clouds of Zeus and vanishes, or like the dust that passes out of sight. Any form of death were welcome, rather than this hateful marriage. "Ah!" they say,—

> "Ah! might I find a place in yon high vault
> Where the rain-clouds are passing into snow,
> Or lonely precipice,
> Whose summit none can see,
> Rock where the vulture haunts,
> Witness for me of my abysmal fall,
> Before the marriage that will pierce my heart
> Becomes my dreaded doom."

And the answering band replies:—

> "I shrink not from the thought of being the prey
> Of dogs and birds that haunt the country round,
> For death shall make me free
> From ills all lamentable;
> Yea, let death rather come
> Than the worse doom of hated marriage-bed.
> What other refuge now remains for me,
> That marriage to avert?"

And still they appeal to God, "whose eyes look upon the thing that is equal," without whom nothing comes to the children of men. Their appeal is interrupted by the arrival of a herald who comes on behalf of the sons of Ægyptus, to command the Danaids to

embark immediately in their ship with them. The complaints and prayers of the Chorus are now mingled with the haughty orders of the herald. They refuse; he threatens force; they cry, and call upon the gods, and imprecate bitter curses upon their ravishers, but all in vain; the herald seizes their leader to drag her by her hair towards the ship. At this point the king with his train appears, and indignantly demands an account of this outrage. The herald protests that he is only asserting a legal claim, and is prepared to justify it by war. The king replies, that if he can persuade the maidens to accompany him, he may take them, but that no constraint shall be put upon them. "Here," he says, "the nail is fixed." The decree is unchangeable, and the herald is peremptorily dismissed. "The Greeks," says the king, "will be more than a match for the Nile; wine and bread are better than barley-beer and byblus-fruit, the food of the Egyptians." Then, turning to the maidens, he offers them safe dwellings in the city—whether they prefer to live among others in the public palaces, or to dwell apart with their attendants; and they refer the choice to their father, who is now returned with a force of soldiers. His answer is wise and fatherly, but a little reminds us of the somewhat tedious wisdom of Polonius. "Men are apt," he says, "to find fault in foreigners, and young girls especially must beware of the least breath of scandal; the safer course must be theirs, to dwell apart in maidenly modesty."

And now all the action of the play is ended, and nothing remains but the final ode. Divided into two

bands, the Danaids sing good wishes for their new country. No longer is the Nile to claim their praise,—

"Nay, but the rivers here, that pour calm streams through our country,
Parents of many a son, making glad the soil of our meadows,
With wide flood rolling on in full and abounding riches."

Then they are somewhat divided in their words: the one band can only repeat its fears of their hateful pursuers, and finds all love and marriage henceforth odious; while the other half of the Chorus is anxious rather not to disparage the divinity of the Cyprian goddess, and looks forward yet to happy wedlock. Yet both unite in speaking well of Aphrodite:—

Semichorus A.

"Not that our kindly strain does slight to Cypris immortal,
For she, together with Hera, as nearest to Zeus is mighty,
A goddess of subtle thoughts she is honoured in mysteries solemn."

Semichorus B.

"Yea, as associates too with that their mother beloved
Are fair Desire and Suasion, whose pleading no man can gainsay;
Yea, to sweet Concord too Aphrodite's power is intrusted,
And the whispering paths of the Loves."

And so, with good hopes for the issue of the trial which yet remains finally to decide their case, the play concludes. This trial probably formed the subject of a succeeding piece.

The motive which predominates in this play is one with which moderns, at least in civilised countries, are not familiar. The claim which any fugitive was supposed to possess on the protection of those to whom he might address himself, naturally ceases to be acknowledged when the improvement and extension of law guarantee safety to all who deserve it, and take out of the hands of private individuals the punishment of those who do not. A suppliant in England nowadays would be at once referred to the law to be protected from wrong or punished for fault. But when law could not do these things, but left the inflicting of punishment in great measure to the offended person, or, in the case of murder, to the relatives of the dead, it was obviously the interest of every man, as well as his duty, to accord to others that protection which he might some day need for himself. Especially in the case of accidental or justifiable homicide the protection of private men was necessary to the slayer, and took the place occupied among the Jews by their cities of refuge. And when the case was such as could be tried at law, it was only by private protection that the accused was preserved from his accuser until the matter could be legally decided. It is clear, then, that in such times the acknowledgment of the suppliant's claim was necessary to society. Being so, it was invested with a religious sanction. The temples of the gods were the natural refuges, since in so holy a spot a man could not be killed without defilement; and hence the gods themselves were believed to befriend the suppliant. And then to fulfil this special function a

special person or a special form of the supreme God was believed to exist, and "Zeus of Supplication" was added to the list of deities. In just the same way "Zeus of Hospitality" enforced the duty, then so important, of receiving those who, in the absence of inns, could find no other resting-place. And how tremendous was the authority of these deities the play before us shows.

But both these duties lose their relative importance as civilisation advances. They were losing it even when Æschylus wrote; and here, as well as elsewhere, we may see him lingering affectionately about the traces of past times and creeds, and investing with picturesque solemnity ruins which he could not restore.

CHAPTER V.

THE PERSIANS.

"THE PERSIANS" was not produced until six or seven years after the events which it celebrates; and this was perhaps an advantage. For no great event can easily be regarded as an entire whole until some time after its occurrence. Details are at first too prominent; personal or local interests have not yet sunk down into their proper relative importance: it is not fully seen, until later, what was the true beginning and source of the main action, nor when it can be rightly said to have ended—in short, the spectator is too close to the object to see it as a whole, and to grasp the principle of its structure. Now it is the very essence of all tragedy that it should present a great action as a whole—in its greatness, not in its complexity; and in Greek tragedy, through its shortness and simplicity, this character is especially marked. Further, we have seen that the Greek dramatist contemplates an action as part of a course of divine providence; sets it, that is, in its true light as a moral result, and traces throughout it the retributive agency of heaven. Clearly this

function cannot be adequately fulfilled until time enough has elapsed to distinguish permanent effects from those which were transient, and to enable the observer, freed from the obstructions of temporary passion, to award praise and blame with justice.

With these considerations before us, we may say that Æschylus could not have produced his drama of "The Persians" earlier, without losing something of unity and certainty, and something of that distance, or half-unreality, which constitutes the characteristic charm of the Athenian tragedy.

Knowing how essential this distance from common life—this "removedness" of the scene and action—is, we shall rather wonder that the poets did not entirely avoid subjects taken from recent history, and confine themselves to

> "Presenting Thebes and Pelops' line,
> Or the tale of Troy divine."

And in fact the cases in which they did leave the mythological cycle were exceptional, and perhaps not often successful; though the pre-eminent importance of the Persian war made success possible here. An early contemporary of Æschylus, Phrynichus, had many years before made a great mistake by his injudicious choice of such a subject—one connected with this very Persian war itself. The war originated, as the reader will remember, in the feuds between the Persians and the Ionian colonies in Asia Minor, of which Miletus was chief. These cities had attempted to throw off the yoke of the Persians, who had long

assailed their liberties, and in the failure of their attempt Miletus was destroyed. The Athenians, as Ionians themselves, were kinsmen and close allies of these Asiatic Greeks; and the fall of their leading city was a heavy blow to Athens, especially as she had made the Ionian cause her own by that enterprise of almost incredible courage, in which her troops burnt the royal city of Sardis, and so brought upon Greece the two gigantic invasions which were repelled at Marathon and Salamis. It was the fall of Miletus which Phrynichus chose for his subject, and so far as its importance went, it was a truly tragic theme; but it came home too closely to the feelings of the Athenians—they could not bear to see the sufferings of their friends so vividly represented, the sympathy exacted was too painful, the drama too like reality; so they fined Phrynichus a large sum for breaking the rules of his art, and giving pain to his audience. Not unnaturally, when the fall of Miletus had been amply revenged, Phrynichus hastened to atone for his error by representing the triumph. He produced a drama founded on the Persian war, two years after Salamis;—as soon, that is, as it could be safely said that Persia was finally defeated. We may not doubt that on this latter occasion the Athenian audience forgot the violation of an unwritten canon of art, in their exultation at the picture of their successes; but we may be sure, at the same time, that Phrynichus was unable to give to his play the same heroic and ideal greatness which we find in that of Æschylus.

We have said that the paramount importance of the Persian war made it a fit subject for tragedy, and we

need not here enlarge upon the causes and signs of that importance; we will point now to another fact by which its case differed from most other events of contemporary history. This fact is the comparative ignorance of the manners and character of the Persians which still prevailed among the Greeks. The enormous size of their armies, their boundless wealth and luxury, their barbarous tongues and dark faces,—these, exaggerated to still greater proportions in the popular imagination, produced an impression of dim and indefinite greatness, not unlike that in which the mist of time veiled the heroes of mythology. How fully aware the poet was of this is amply shown by his manner of dealing with the subject. He has kept as far as possible from familiar names and places; his hero is not the victorious Greek, but the defeated Persian king; the scene is not the battle-field,—not Marathon, or Thermopylæ, or Salamis,—but the palace of Xerxes, far away in the wonder-land of the east; and all is treated from the Persian side. Instead of the triumph of Israel, he gives us the fears and sorrows of the mother of Sisera and her attendant ladies.

Very much, then, is gained by this treatment. Not only is Xerxes greater in his fall than even Miltiades in his triumph,—as a despot, if great at all, is greater than one leader among many can be in a free people,—but the familiar event is set in a new light, as a Persian calamity instead of a Greek success, and in a light even more flattering to the national pride of Athens.

We have spoken at length on this point, lest it

should be thought that Æschylus makes Xerxes his hero simply because tragedy requires a calamity. A sad ending is not essential to tragedy; greatness and "removedness" are.

But we must hasten to inquire at what point in the series of events the action of the play begins, and what was the knowledge of the preceding history with which the Athenian spectator was prepared. It was in the year 500 B.C., eight-and-twenty years ago, that the Ionian cities rebelled against Darius, and nearly six years later that Miletus was sacked and the revolt suppressed. The next year the Athenians had come to the assistance of their kinsmen in Asia; had accomplished a two months' march from the sea to Sardis, and insulted the Great King almost in his own house. Darius had no sooner put down the rebels in Ionia than he remembered the insolent strangers who had ventured to burn his palace; and in the year 490 B.C. he sent over the great armament under Mardonius which was to bring the Athenians in chains to Persia. Till of late their very name was unknown to him. He is said to have asked contemptuously where Athens was; a question which, in the play before us, is put into the mouth of his wife Atossa. But the unknown little state proved too strong for Mardonius, and Marathon destroyed the hopes of that expedition. This was in 490 B.C., or about eighteen years ago.

Darius bequeathed to his son Xerxes the task of subjugating Greece, and after several years spent in preparations, the young king set forth to lead against these few despised tribes the flower of all the nations

which owned his rule. The incredible numbers which the historians assign to his forces are well known; at the lowest calculation they far exceeded the greatest hosts of modern times. But wealth, when it has given birth to pride, always brings ruin on its possessor. Overweening confidence is, in the Greek creed, an insult to the gods, and cannot fail to call down their wrath. Such was the fate of Xerxes. Checked at Thermopylæ, routed at Salamis, driven home in confusion to his own shores, followed thither by losses and defeat, the Great King became a spectacle to all men of the vanity of greatness when it is not guarded by moderation. Now for five years at least the Persian power has lain prostrate at the feet of Greece, and men have had time to learn the lesson which her misfortunes teach.

Such are perhaps the reflections which pass through the Athenian's mind when he hears it announced that the next play is to be "The Persians."

The curtain rises* on a splendid scene of Eastern magnificence. It is Susa, the Persian capital, the abode of fabulous wealth, though now so humbled. The Chorus enter with the usual stately march, and with more than the usual gorgeousness of dress. They are the state councillors of the Great King, who, under the queen-mother Atossa, guard the dominions of their absent master. As they advance towards the orchestra they sing, in their processional hymn, a strain of anxiety and sad foreboding. No messengers have

* Or, more strictly speaking, "falls." The curtain was removed by winding it round a roller placed below—not, as in our theatres, above.

come from the host of late; the land is empty, all are gone to the war; and a gloomy desolation, not unmixed with apprehension, makes wives and parents

> "Count the slow days,
> And tremble at the long protracted time."

The chant contains a catalogue of nobles who are gone;—a list of sounding names, diversified with picturesque circumstances, reminding us of the roll of the fallen angels in Milton, or the lists of dead warriors in Homer:—

> "Amistres, Artaphernes, and the might
> Of great Astaspes; Megabazes bold . . .
> Artembares, that in his fiery horse
> Delights: Masistres; and Imœus bold,
> Bending with manly strength his stubborn bow;
> Pharandaces, and Sosthenes that drives
> With military pomp his rapid steeds."

From sacred Nile and Memphis; Lycians, the sons of luxury; foresters from far inland; troops from Euphrates and golden Babylon; Mysians who wield the javelin; Mardon from Tmolus, and Tharybis and Arcteus—all are gone forth to battle, and Persia is desolate and sad.

Some have found in this opening a burlesque of Persian names intended to amuse the Athenians: we may rather regard it as showing, what we have seen before, how Æschylus shares with Homer and Milton and Scott that power over names, which is one of the surest signs, says Mr Palgrave, of high poetic talent.

When the Chorus have reached the orchestra, their

song begins with a description of the grand departure of the army, and the proud position of Xerxes, himself the most beautiful in person of all that magnificent host.

Strophe.

"Already o'er the adverse strand
In arms the monarch's martial squadrons spread;
The threat'ning ruin shakes the land,
And each tall city bows its towered head.
Bark bound to bark, their wondrous way
They bridge across the indignant sea;
The narrow Hellespont's vexed waves disdain,
His proud neck taught to bear the chain.
Now has the peopled Asia's warlike lord,
By land, by sea, with foot, with horse
Resistless in his rapid course,
O'er all their realms his warring thousands poured;
Now his intrepid chiefs surveys,
And glitt'ring like a god his radiant state displays."

Antistrophe.

"Fierce as the dragon scaled in gold
Through the deep files he darts his glowing eye:
And pleased their order to behold,
His joyous standard blazing to the sky,
Rolls onward his Assyrian car,
Directs the thunder of the war,
Bids the winged arrows' iron storm advance
Against the slow and cumbrous lance.
What shall withstand the torrent of his sway,
When dreadful o'er the yielding shores
The impetuous tide of battle roars,
And sweeps the weak opposing mounds away?
So Persia with resistless might
Rolls her unnumbered hosts of heroes to the fight."

Very pleasing to the Athenian is the irony which he traces here;—the contrast between the hope and the event. Those clouds of arrows only kept the sun from the eyes of the Greeks, while the "slow and cumbrous lance" was active enough to scatter all those "unnumbered hosts of heroes." Still intenser is the irony in the stanzas that follow—"What mortal," they sing, "can withstand misfortune and the vengeance of the sky? Flattering at first, she falls with crushing power upon her victim: and so"—mark here the irony—"shall Persia fall upon her foes." But there is ground for fear too. While all are away in Greece, any invader might find in Persia an easy prey. Then how would her homes be filled with mourning; with maidens rushing in despair about her streets, lamenting for the guardians of her towers; with wives deploring the long absence of their loves! So the song ends with the very same strain of lamentation for a supposed calamity as will soon be raised for a real one; when the youth, for whom the maidens weep, will be known to be absent for ever, and the matron's couch for ever desolate.

When this chorus, one of the finest in all Æschylus, is concluded, Atossa, the queen-mother,—"the mother of the Persians' god,"—comes upon the scene, and is greeted by the elders with the utmost reverence. She comes to seek their advice. Unquiet thoughts have for some time disturbed her, and dreams of ominous import have visited her, but especially in the night that is just past. "Methought," she says,

"Two women stood before mine eyes
Gorgeously vested, one in Persian robes
Adorned, the other in the Doric garb.
With more than mortal majesty they moved,
Of peerless beauty; sisters too they seemed,
Though distant each from each they chanced to dwell,
In Greece the one, on the barbaric coast
The other. 'Twixt them soon dissension rose:
My son then hasted to compose their strife,
Soothed them to fair accord, beneath his car
Yokes them, and reins their harnessed necks. The one
Exulting in her rich array, with pride
Arching her stately neck, obeyed the reins;
The other with indignant fury spurned
The car, and dashed it piecemeal, rent the reins
And tore the yoke asunder: down my son
Fell from the seat, and instant at his side
His father stands, Darius, at his fall
Impressed with pity: him when Xerxes saw,
Glowing with grief and shame he rends his robes.
This was the dreadful vision of the night."

Disturbed by such a dream, the queen had gone to sacrifice to the gods, but there a new omen had presented itself—an eagle defeated by a hawk, and flying for sanctuary to the altar of the Sun. She cannot but interpret these things as portending some misfortune to her son, and she feels that on his success in war his prestige at home, and perhaps his throne, depends. By the advice of the elders, she promises to seek assistance from the gods, and in particular to pray for help to the shade of her dead husband Darius. Meanwhile she asks the old question that had so irritated Athenian pride—"Where, in what clime, the towers of Athens rise?"

"*Chorus.* Far in the west, where sets the imperial sun.
Atossa. Send they embattled numbers to the field?
Chor. A force that to the Medes hath wrought much woe.
Atos. Have they sufficient treasures in their houses?
Chor. Their rich earth yields a copious fount of silver.*
Atos. From the strong bow wing they the barbèd shaft?
Chor. They grasp the stout spear, and the massy shield.
Atos. What monarch reigns, whose power commands their ranks?
Chor. Slaves to no lord, they own no kingly power.
Atos. How can they then resist the invading foe?
Chor. As to spread havoc through the numerous host
That round Darius formed their glitt'ring files.
Atos. Thy words strike deep, and wound the parent's breast,
Whose sons are marched to such a dangerous field."

In this way the queen gains some notion of her son's danger, while, by the way, the Greek spear is again contrasted with the Persian arrow, and the Athenian freedom with the despotic rule of Xerxes. Atossa is made to wonder that a free people can resist nations who are driven into battle with whips and goads, in order that the Athenian may be led to reflect that he owes his independence to his free constitution.

But forebodings are now to be converted into actual lamentation. A messenger arrives with cries of "Woe to Persia!" and briefly tells his tale—"The whole barbaric host has fallen."

* The silver mines of Laurium, in the south of Attica.

"In heaps the unhappy dead lie on the strand
Of Salamis, and all the neighbouring shores."

Under the first crushing force of this announcement Atossa is silent. The Chorus are loud in their cries, but the queen speaks no word; and when at last she finds a voice, she dares not utter the question that is nearest to her heart, but asks, Who is not fallen?

"What leader must we wail? What sceptred chief
Dying hath left his troops without a lord?"

The messenger answers her meaning,—

"Xerxes himself lives, and beholds the light."

Then comes a list of the fallen; a list as long as, and even more beautiful than, that which the Chorus gave of the chiefs in their hour of pride. It is doubtless imitated from Homer, and has some of those touches of pathos in which Virgil delights on a similar occasion.

"Amestris, and Amphistreus there
Grasps his war-wearied spear; there prostrate lies
The illustrious Arimardus, long his loss
Shall Sardis weep: the Mysian Sisames,
And Tharybis that o'er the burdened deep
Led five times fifty vessels; Lerna gave
The hero birth, and manly grace adorned
His pleasing form, but low in death he lies,
Unhappy in his fate."

Our sympathy is roused for the hero of Lerna, just as in the Æneid for Rhipeus, or Panthus,—

"Then Rhipeus followed in th' unequal fight,
Just of his word, observant of the right,
Heaven thought not so."—Virg., Æn. i. 426. (Pitt.)

Having mentioned a long list of the dead—yet only a few out of so many—the messenger goes on to describe the circumstances of the defeat. And here we are to have, from an eyewitness, a detailed account of the fight at Salamis. The poet had best be accurate and impartial, for half his audience were present there, and any error will be promptly noticed.

"In numbers, the barbaric fleet
Was far superior: in ten squadrons, each
Of thirty ships, Greece ploughed the deep; of these
One held a distant station. Xerxes led
A thousand ships; their number well I know;
Two hundred more and seven, that swept the seas
With speediest sail: this was their full amount.
And in the engagement seemed we not secure
Of victory? But unequal Fortune sunk
Our scale in fight, discomfiting our hosts."

And even Atossa is constrained to say;

"The gods preserve the city of Minerva:"

and the messenger replies;—

"The walls of Athens are impregnable,
Their firmest bulwarks her heroic sons!"

How the Athenian audience must have cheered!

The description which follows gives us a more vivid picture of an ancient sea-fight than is anywhere else to be found. It is the work of a soldier who understood the tactics displayed, as well as of a poet whose eyes

were open to the outward aspect of the scene. It explains to us why there was so little distinction in those times between the soldier and the sailor. The same men who fought on land at Marathon fought on the sea at Salamis, and their naval warfare consisted mainly in hand-to-hand fighting after the ships had grappled one another; the chief aim, besides this, being to disable the enemy's ship by a blow from the armed prow, either crushing in its sides, or passing over and breaking its oars.

The messenger narrates how, by a stratagem of the Greeks, which we know from Herodotus was due to Themistocles, the Persians had been induced to surround the Greek fleet, in the belief that they meditated flight by night. Every passage by which a Greek ship could escape was carefully secured, but the Greeks did not stir. But when the day with its white steeds spread in its beauty over the earth,—

> "At once from every Greek with glad acclaim
> Burst forth the song of war, whose lofty notes
> The echo of the island rocks returned,
> Spreading dismay through Persia's hosts thus fallen
> From their high hopes: no flight this solemn strain
> Portended, but deliberate valour bent
> On daring battle; whilst the trumpet's sound
> Kindled the flames of war."

With oars dashing up the waves, the Greeks advance to the attack, their right wing leading, and on every side the voice of exhortation is heard. "Forward, Greeks, for your homes and the temples of your gods, and for your father's tombs: all are at stake to-day!"

A Greek ship is the first to strike, and crushes in by the force of its charge the sculptured prow of a Phœnician: then the engagement rages along the whole line.

"The deep array
Of Persia at the first sustained the encounter;
But their thronged numbers, in the narrow seas
Confined, want room for action; and, deprived
Of mutual aid, beaks clash with beaks, and each
Breaks all the other's oars: with skill disposed
The Grecian navy circled them around
With fierce assault."

The sea is hidden with ships floating keel upwards, and with wrecks and corpses. The shores are covered with the dead. The Persians take to flight, and the Greeks pursue, spearing and striking their drowning foes, "as men spear a shoal of tunnies," with spars and broken oars; and over the wide sea wailing is heard and lamentation, until night falls upon the scene of destruction. Worse even than this remains. For on a little island close to Salamis,—a rugged island such as Pan delights in,—Xerxes had set the flower of his nobility, that they might cut down the Greeks who would seek shelter there, or help any Persians in distress; and all these, the bravest of his hosts, were cut to pieces before the monarch's eyes. "Bitter fruit," Atossa cries,

"My son hath tasted from his purposed vengeance
On Athens famed for arms; the fatal field
Of Marathon, red with barbaric blood,
Sufficed not; that defeat he thought to avenge,
And pulled this hideous ruin on his head."

Already the sufferers are attributing their troubles to the wanton rashness of Xerxes, and we shall see that this feeling is more and more clearly expressed as the play goes on, so that Darius, with whom the whole expedition originated, is regarded as having been comparatively cautious and sparing of his people. This is not a true view of the history. Xerxes was rather indolent and reluctant, and required much pressure before he would carry out his father's plans. Whether Æschylus was himself in error on this point, or wished to represent the Persians as forgetting the true state of the case in their distress, we cannot tell: at any rate, it is necessary to the poem that the author of the calamity should suffer by it, so that it was natural to exaggerate the rashness of Xerxes, and to contrast with it the supposed moderation of his father.

But there are more calamities still to tell. In their disordered flight some died of thirst and famine; some perished in the attempt to cross the frozen Strymon, the great river of Thrace, where "such as owned no god till now, awe-struck, with many a prayer, adored the earth and sky." A few "dragged on their toilsome march, and reached their native soil,"—few indeed out of so many.

"My visions," says the unhappy queen, "were too true; it is too late for sacrifices now to change the past, yet I will offer libations to the dead and prayers to the gods, in case there may yet be some better thing in store." Then she departs, begging the Chorus to receive her son with words of comfort.

Sad and majestic music now swells up the crowded theatre, and echoes on the steep rocks of the Acropolis. The Persian councillors begin that chorus of lamentation which was portended by their opening chorus of anxiety.

Strophe.

"Awful sovereign of the skies,
When now o'er Persia's numerous host
Thou bad'st the storm with ruin rise,
All her proud vaunts of glory lost,
Ecbatana's imperial head
By thee was wrapped in sorrow's dark'ning shade;
Through Susa's palaces with wide lament,
By their soft hands their veils all rent,
The copious tear the virgins pour,
That trickles their bare bosoms o'er.
From her sweet couch upstarts the widowed bride,
Her lord's loved image rushing on her soul,
Throws the rich ornaments of youth aside,
And gives her griefs to flow without control;
Her griefs not causeless; for the mighty slain
Our melting tears demand, and sorrow-softened strain."

Antistrophe.

"Now her wailings wide despair
Pours these exhausted regions o'er;
Xerxes, ill-fated, led the war;
Xerxes, ill-fated, leads no more:
Xerxes sent forth the unwise command,
The crowded ships unpeopled all the land;
That land o'er which Darius held his reign,
Courting the arts of peace, in vain,
O'er all his grateful realms adored,
The stately Susa's gentle lord.

Black o'er the waves his burdened vessels sweep,
For Greece elate the warlike squadrons fly:
Now crushed, and whelmed beneath the indignant deep,
The shattered wrecks and lifeless heroes lie;
Whilst from the arms of Greece escaped, with toil
The unsheltered monarch roams o'er Thracia's dreary soil."

And they lament for power overthrown, so many nobles and rulers lost, not without implying that the power of Xerxes himself is shaken, and "his regal greatness is no more."

Atossa returns: this time she comes without her queenly train, and bears the offerings which are to call Darius from the dead. The list of them is graceful and pathetic. We may notice here again how Æschylus shares with other great poets the power of moving us by these simple things; they are like Perdita's flowers, or the offerings "to deck the laureate hearse where Lycid lies."

"Delicious milk that foams
White from the sacred heifer; liquid honey,
Extract of flowers; and from its virgin fount
The running crystal: this pure draught, that flowed
From the ancient vine, of power to bathe the spirits
In joy; the yellow olive's fragrant fruit,
That glories in its leaves' unfading verdure;
With flowers of various hues, earth's fairest offspring,
Enwreathed."

The Chorus join to hers their prayers to Darius, and entreat the powers that rule the dead, and earth, and heaven, to send up his ghost into the light, that

he may show the future, and the remedy, if there be any. They praise the dead monarch, who "wasted not his subjects' blood," and with repeated cries call him from the tomb. Darius comes. The ghost rises from the ground before his tomb, like the ghost in "Hamlet," in

> "That fair and warlike form
> In which the majesty of buried *Persia*
> Did sometimes march;"

and, anxiously startled, asks what troubles are troubling the state. Like the Danish king, Darius, for all his greatness, speaks with awe and reverence of the realms from which he comes: the gods there are stern, and will not easily allow the dead to return; his time is short; the "fearful summons" will soon call him back. He hears the full story of the calamity, and attributes all to the arrogance and rashness of his son, who had dared to chain the sacred Hellespont and divine Bosporus, and "to rise above the gods and Neptune's might." "Those who urged him on," says the ghost, "to this mad enterprise, have done a deed of ruin such as never yet was done to Persia, and have wasted the grand fabric which so many illustrious kings had raised. Greece must be attacked no more; the very earth fights for her, destroying your troops by famine and disease. The remnant who survive shall not return. In their wanton insolence they have overthrown temples and statues of the gods, and now heaven's anger is upon them. On Platæa's fields they shall lie in heaps, to teach mortals humility."

A tender passage follows, in which the father bids his wife show all gentleness to her offending son. It is not unlike the tenderness with which the ghost in "Hamlet" ends his revelations, bidding the son be gentle to his mother:—

> "With gentlest courtesy
> Soothe his affliction; for his duteous ear,
> I know, will listen to thy voice alone.
> Now to the realms of darkness I descend."

Again the Chorus chant the glories of Darius's reign, and sadly contrast them with the present ruin, while the queen goes away to put on her most gorgeous robes, according to the ghost's command, and meet her son.

> "E'en the proud towns, that reared
> Sublime along the Ionian coast their towers,
> Where wealth her treasures pours,
> Peopled from Greece, his prudent reign revered.
> With such unconquered might
> His hardy warriors shook the embattled field,
> Heroes that Persia yields,
> And those from distant lands that took their way,
> And wedged in close array
> Beneath his glittering banners claimed the fight.
> But now these glories are no more:
> Farewell the big war's plumèd pride,
> The gods have crushed this trophied power;
> Sunk are our vanquished arms beneath the indignant tide."

As this chorus ends, Xerxes, in rent robes and with disfigured face, comes lamenting upon the scene, tortured with the thought of his lost heroes, and wishing

that he had died with them. The rest of the play is but one long wail. "I have no voice," the Chorus says,—

> "No swelling harmony,
> No descant, save these notes of woe,
> Harsh and repulsive to the sullen sigh,
> Rude strains that unmelodious flow,
> To welcome thy return."

They ask after all the chiefs,—after Pharnaces and Dotamas,—

> "Psammis in mailèd cuirass dressed,
> And Susiscanes' glitt'ring crest."

And in every gloomy pause Xerxes replies that they are dead—drowned, or killed in the shock of battle.

The climax of disaster and disgrace is reached in the condition of the king himself.

"*Cho.* Is all thy glory lost?
Xer. Seest thou these poor remains of my rent robes?
Cho. I see, I see.
Xer. And this ill-furnished quiver?
Cho. Wherefore preserved?
Xer. To store my treasured arrows.
Cho. Few, very few.
Xer. And few my friendly aids."

And the irony of the whole, and its bearing on Athenian prowess, is summed up :—

"*Cho.* I thought these Grecians shrank appalled at arms.
Xer. No; they are bold and daring."

And so, with reiterated lamentations, the spectacle concludes.

With the Athenians, whose glory it exhibited so prominently, this play was naturally a favourite; but it appealed also to a far wider audience. The Persian War had been the means of bringing all Greeks together in union against the common foe; and accordingly, a play like this could not but be welcomed as an expression of the new national enthusiasm. This explains the fact that it was among those chosen by Hiero, tyrant of Syracuse, while Æschylus was his guest, to be repeated before the Greeks of Sicily; and this also justifies the poet in leaving for once the old national heroes, Hercules and Agamemnon, to celebrate the event which, for the first time since the Trojan war, was for all Greece a common triumph.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SEVEN CHIEFS AGAINST THEBES.

THE story of Thebes and its sieges was one of the most favourite themes of the Greek poets from the earliest times. The many old chronicles in verse which recorded different parts of the history formed a continuous series, second only in popularity to that Trojan series of which the 'Iliad' was the centre. In the uncritical language of the early Greeks, all these were attributed to Homer, and to a few other names—for they are little more; so that when we are told that Æschylus called his own tragedies only scraps from the great banquet of Homer, it is not to the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' alone, but to this large collection of poetical chronicles, that we must suppose him to refer. But the dramatist cannot deal with the history of whole cities; his subjects are individuals or families. Out of all the noble names which were connected with the Theban story, the fancy of the Greek tragedians dwelt most fondly on the fate of the unhappy house of Œdipus. The terrible story is well known.

Laius the king (so runs the legend) cast out his son

Œdipus that he might die, because an oracle had foretold that the child should kill his father. But Laius did not so avoid his fate, for the child was preserved by a shepherd, and became a man; and meeting Laius one day on a road he slew him unwittingly, and came to Thebes. He saved the city from the ravaging Sphinx by guessing her riddle about the life of man, and so became king of Thebes, and husband of the late king's wife—his own mother. But at last the gods brought it about that all the truth should be revealed to this unhappy king; and when he heard it, he put out his own eyes in his despair. Afterwards his sons Eteocles and Polynices, wishing that so horrible a thing should be forgotten, shut up their father in a prison; and he in his anger cursed them, and prayed that they might divide the kingdom between them by the sword.

So they, fearing lest the gods should fulfil that prayer, determined to reign in turn, each for a year. Eteocles, as the elder, reigned first, and at the end of the time agreed on, Polynices came and asked for the sceptre; but Eteocles refused, and clung resolutely to his throne, and sent him away empty. Then Polynices went away, and came to Argos, and married the daughter of King Adrastus, and persuaded him to help him with an army to recover his kingdom. So Adrastus gave him a great host, and he came against the Thebans. And six other captains led the host with him, and he was the seventh; and each led a division against one of the seven gates.

In the besieged city the scene is now laid. Before us rises the citadel, and the citizens—among whom

enters Eteocles himself—are gathering in the square beneath. Here is a picturesque scene to begin with. Such openings are favourites in our own operas; and the reader will remember how effective they are rendered by variety of dresses, and the signs of different trades—by rapid motion, and the hum of many voices. These gay pictures are fit introductions to a modern opera; but the serious tragedy of Athens requires a more solemn opening. Moreover, the square of a Greek city would not supply so highly coloured, so harlequin-like a scene; nor would the taste of a Greek audience appreciate it. They prefer the beautiful to the picturesque. Our Theban citizens come in with more order, and less animation; their dresses are graceful in their folds, and rich in their simple colours; and their grouping on the stage is formal and systematic, instead of studiously disordered. We are to remember that they represent the dignity of a great people, and are there not to amuse or excite us, but to enact a solemn scene in the history of a very serious world.

The Athenian audience is always interested in a crowd. Every citizen is a politician, and delights in comparing other constitutions with his own; so that when a popular assembly in any shape comes before his eyes he is eagerly on the watch for indications of the degree of freedom which they possess, and for illustrations of his own political theories. This curiosity is consulted in the opening words of Eteocles, who begins by stating the necessity of watchfulness on the part of a ruler, the helmsman of the state, since his position is both responsible and thankless. Prosperity, he

says, is attributed to the gods, while for disasters the king is always held guilty. Much the same sentiment is expressed by an English writer :—

> "Among misfortunes that dissension brings
> This not the least is, that belongs to kings :
> If wars go well, each to a part lays claim ;
> If ill, then kings, not subjects, bear the blame."

Only the Englishman says nothing about the gods. However, it is ill-omened to speak of disaster, so Eteocles goes on to pray that all such calamity may be kept from Thebes by Zeus the Averter. We, who are in the poet's secret, know that the ill omen is not to be so lightly put aside. The king calls on all, young and old, to come to the aid of the state, and pay to their native earth the debt due to her for their nurture. This claim of the mother-land is very touchingly urged. "Defend," he says,

> "This land, your common parent,
> And dearest nurse, who on her fost'ring soil
> Upheld with bounteous care your infant steps,
> And trained you to this service, that your hands
> For her defence might lift the faithful shield." *

This childlike attachment to the native soil, the simplest basis of patriotism, has been generally exchanged among civilised nations for love of one's countrymen, or loyalty to the king—or has been supplanted by philosophical theories about nationality ; but even now it is curious to notice how, when a nation is strongly and deeply moved, the old simple

* The translations throughout this play are from Potter.

ideas crop up again, and we see theory and loyalty comparatively weak motives by the side of love for the waters of the Rhine, or the sacred soil of France. The old world-worn nation becomes a child again in the violence of its passion. Cicero appeals — half poetically it is true, but very beautifully—to the same feelings, when he is claiming for the state the services of its members in peace as well as war. "Our country has not given us birth and reared us without expecting from us in return some 'nurture-fee'; she did not mean only to make herself the slave of our convenience, and furnish us with a safe shelter to be idle in, a quiet spot for our repose: she gave us birth and nurture that she might engage our best energies and talents in her own service, allowing us to use for our own private ends so much, and so much only, as might not be needed for her own." And so says Ben Jonson;

> "She is our common mother, and doth claim
> The prime part of us."

With the Thebans now the call of patriotism is most pressing. Blind Tiresias, the wise augur, has announced that this night a great assault upon the town may be expected, and against this danger every precaution must be taken. Scouts have been sent out to reconnoitre; and, even while the king is speaking, one of them arrives. He brings tidings that the prophecy of the augur is being already fulfilled. Seven great chiefs are arming, and have sworn a solemn oath over the body of a bull slain on a black-orbed shield, dipping their hands in the blood—

"From their firm base to rend
These walls, and lay their ramparts in the dust;
Or, dying, with their warm blood steep this earth."

And they were casting lots, when he left, for their several stations. He urges on Eteocles, as "prudent helmsman"* of the state, the duty of guarding the towers, for already

"All in arms the Argive host comes on,
Involved in dust, and from the snorting steeds
The thick foam falls, and whitens all the fields.
Even now the waves of war roar o'er the plain."

The scout returns to his post; and after a brief appeal to the protection of the gods, the king also leaves the scene to attend to the defences, and the stage is for a moment empty. Then the Chorus enters —a band of Theban maidens, who are going in solemn procession to offer their supplications at the altars of the gods. They enter the orchestra at once, and deploy the ranks of their little battalions, like the Egyptian Suppliants in a former play. Their song presents a wonderful intermingling of the various

* The reader will notice how constantly metaphors from naval life occur in the poets of the seafaring Athenians. The figure before us has become a commonplace in modern poetry. So Scott says of Pitt:—

"With Palinure's unaltered mood,
Firm at his dangerous post he stood;
Each call for needful rest repelled,
With dying hand the rudder held,
Till in his fall, with fateful sway,
The steerage of the realm gave way."

tones which befit the inhabitants of a besieged and panic-stricken city. Fear is the predominant emotion; but from time to time martial chords break out through the uncertain strain, as they describe the sound and aspect of the attacking force; and from time to time the music sinks into the tenderest notes of pathos, as the maidens call for help on each god and goddess in turn. First they call on Mars, as god of war, to look upon his own city, which once he held so dear, on all the gods who love Thebes—

> "And all ye powers whose guardian care
> Protects these walls, this favoured land,
> O hear these pious, suppliant strains;
> Propitious aid us, aid a virgin band,
> And save us from the victor's chains!"

Then they appeal to Zeus, in whose hands are all events, and to his warlike offspring, Pallas, and great Poseidon, lord of the horse and the ocean, and Venus, the mother of their race. They cry to Apollo, and Artemis the goddess of the dreadful bow, and queenly Juno; beseeching them in turn, by the crash of shields, and the noise of crested warriors, and clang of bits ringing out slaughter—by the seven champions at the gates—by the heavy rumbling of chariots, and the showers of stones that rage against the battlements—to rout these alien hosts and save the sacred city.

But the prayers of maidens, beautiful as they are, are not thought the best means for nerving the energy of the citizens and promoting the defence. Eteocles, returning, rebukes them in no measured terms; and,

as a man might who was hampered by the weakness of women in the moment of emergency, he launches out into stern condemnation of the sex—

"Nor in misfortune, nor in dear success,
Be woman my associate; if her power
Bears sway, her insolence exceeds all bounds;
But if she fears, woe to that house and city.
. . . . . .
War is no female province, but the scene
For men: hence; home, nor spread your mischiefs here!"

The Greek had not that chivalrous respect for women which would insure the condemnation, by a modern audience, of such a sentiment; and, on the other hand, their sense of proportion was offended by anything approaching to forwardness on a woman's part, or any interference with the offices of men. Their estimate of "women's work" is best expressed by the words which Thucydides puts into the mouth of Pericles: "That woman is most laudable whose name is least heard among men either for praise or blame." In the last lines, however, Eteocles goes beyond the general Greek sentiment and practice. Both Homer and Virgil represent the matrons of a beleaguered town as going in procession to the temples, to entreat for their countrymen the protection of the gods; and in all civilised countries the rule has to some extent been recognised, that "men must work and women must weep." And the king soon modifies his prohibition. He orders the women to leave the shrines, but to continue their prayers in quiet by

themselves, where the sound of their grief may not increase the panic.

> "My charge shall be at our seven gates to fix
> Six of our bravest youth, myself the seventh,
> In dreadful opposition to the foe."

In obedience to the king's command, the band of maidens begin their prayers afresh. The first tones are soft and feminine, and exhibit, in their expressions of fear, that delicate perception of a particular phase of emotion and wonderful command of words for its description, which, even in this early period, distinguishes the Greek writers. "Care and fear," the maiden says, "keep all rest from my heart; pressing on my inmost soul comes a crowd of anxieties, that kindles there a burning dread."

> "And as the trembling dove, whose fears
> Keep watch in her uneasy bow'r,
> Thinks in each rustling leaf she hears
> The serpent gliding to devour,
> I tremble at each sullen sound
> Of clashing arms, that roars around:
> With all their troops, with all their powers,
> Fierce they advance to storm our towers;
> Now hurtling in the darkened sky
> What does my cruel fate prepare!
> Rude batt'ring stones incessant fly,
> And all the missive storm of war."

Half familiarly they argue with the gods. "Where will ye find," they say, "a better home?" If the city is taken, it will be because the gods have left it,

as the king said earlier in the play. "The gods, 'tis said, desert a conquered town." Then they must go forth—these gods who have dwelt so long in Thebes, and gotten their shrines and favourite haunts there—they must go out to seek some other resting-place, some vacant spot unoccupied by deities, desolate, and cherished by no devoted worshippers. Gods, like men, have homes which they get to love; they cling to the people who have been kind to them, and feel uneasy in a strange abode.

"Ah, to what fairer, richer plain,
Your radiant presence will you deign,
These fields abandoned to the foes,
Through whose crisped shades and smiling meads,
Jocundly warbling as she goes,
Dirce her liquid treasures leads,
And boasts that Tethys never gave,
Nor all her nymphs, a purer wave!"

Then they plead the antiquity of their city. It would be sad for so venerable a city to be cast down to Hades, and for its daughters to be dragged like horses, by their hair, through the streets, with their robes torn from about them. The cruel outrages offered to women are the most prominent feature in ancient descriptions of the sufferings of a captured town. The other features are vividly described:—

"From house to house, from street to street,
The crashing flames roar round and meet;
Each way the fiery deluge preys,
And girds us with the circling blaze.

The brave that 'midst these dire alarms
For their lost country greatly dare,
And fired with vengeance rush to arms,
Fall victims to the blood-stained spear.
The bleeding babe, with innocent cries,
Drops from his mother's breast, and dies.
See rapine rushes, bent on prey,
His hasty step brooks no delay;
The spoiler, loaded with his store,
Envious the loaded spoiler views;
Disdains another should have more,
And his insatiate toil renews.
Thick on the earth the rich spoil lies;
For the rude plunderers' restless-rolling tide,
Their worthless numbers waving wide,
Drop in their wild haste many a glitt'ring prize."

The chorus is brought to an end by the return of the messenger, who is now able to give a full account of the seven champions who are leading the attack. The portion of the play which follows is occupied entirely with the description of the combatants who are to meet at each gate. It combines three elements —an epic, a tragic, and a scenic.

It is a grand epic muster-roll: heroes and arms and warlike challenges are described with the pomp and circumstance of the Homeric story; as graphic as Scott, as solemn as Milton.

The tragic element is twofold. First, through all the messenger's description of arms and shields, runs the idea of the moral conflict that is to be waged at the same time between moderation and boastfulness, between patriotism and fury; a part and type of the

conflict which the Greek and the artist are always waging against the Oriental and the savage. Secondly, —and this is its main purpose in the play,—the description of the several champions of the foe, each in turn calling for a Theban to oppose him, leads up gradually to the last pair, when Polynices, the brother of the king, and most daring of the assailants, can be opposed by none but by the king himself. As one chief after another is named, we tremble to feel that it will soon come to this ill-fated pair, and we know what the issue will be,—

"How each will slay his brother at a blow,"—

and how their fall will "leave the land accurst," a legacy of new troubles for the unhappy house of Œdipus.

Besides these, the passage has a scenic element. It is a remarkable instance of that stately regularity which we have noticed before. The messenger and the king stand together on the stage, and the Chorus is arrayed in the orchestra. The messenger describes an Argive champion; the king, in reply, describes the Theban whom he will send against him; the Chorus utters a short prayer for the success of the native champion. This is repeated seven times; the seventh being distinguished by the addition of some discussion between the three speakers, and ending in a much longer choric ode. Each of the Argive heroes is known by the cognisance on his shield, like the knights of medieval chivalry.

The first foe is Tydeus.

"Already near the Prœtian gate in arms
Stands Tydeus raging; for the prophet's voice
Forbids his foot to pass Ismenus' stream,
The victims not propitious: at the pass
Furious, and eager for the fight, the chief,
Fierce as the dragon when the mid-day sun
Calls forth his glowing terrors, raves aloud,
Reviles the sage as forming tim'rous league
With war and fate. Frowning he speaks, and shakes
The dark crest streaming o'er his shaded helm
In triple wave; whilst dreadful ring around
The brazen bosses of his shield, impressed
With this proud argument. A sable sky
Burning with stars; and in the midst, full-orbed,
A silver moon, the eye of night, o'er all
Awful in beauty pours her peerless light.
Clad in these proud habiliments, he stands
Close to the river's margin, and with shouts
Demands the war, like an impatient steed,
That pants upon the foaming curb, and waits
With fiery expectation the known signal,
Swift at the trumpet's sound to burst away.
What equal chief wilt thou appoint against him?"

So speaks the soldier, and Eteocles replies:—

"This military pride, it moves not me.
The gorgeous blazonry of arms, the crest
High waving o'er the helm, the roaring boss,
Harmless without the spear, imprint no wound.
The sable night, spangled with golden stars,
On his proud shield impressed, perchance may prove
A gloomy presage. Should the shade of night
Fall on his dying eyes, the boastful charge
May to the bearer be deemed ominous,

And be the prophet of his own destruction.
Against his rage the son of Astacus,
That breathes deliberate valour, at that gate
Will I appoint commander; bent on deeds
Of glory, but a votary at the shrine
Of modesty, he scorns the arrogant vaunt
As base, but bids brave actions speak his worth.
The flower of that bold stem, which from the ground
Rose armed, and fell not in the deathful fight,
Is Menalippus; him his parent earth
Claims as her own, and in her natural right
Calls him to guard her from the hostile spear:
But the brave deed the die of war decides."

Then the Chorus follows, with its prayer:—

"Go then, my guardian hero, go;
And may each fav'ring god with bright success
Thy gen'rous valour bless;
For at thy country's dear command
Thou arm'st thy righteous hand,
To pour her vengeance on the foe.
Yet my sad heart must sigh,
When on the blood-empurpled ground,
Gored with many a gaping wound,
I see my dearest friends expiring lie."

At the Electra gates stands Capaneus, the impious, who openly defies both gods and men. He laughs at the thunderbolts of heaven, and will take the city, he says, "whether Zeus will or no." His cognisance is a flaming torch, and his motto, "I will burn the city." Against him is set the fiery Polyphontes; and the Chorus prays that the heaven's lightning which he defies may fall and blast him; as, indeed, it did.

To the gates of Neis comes Eteoclus, who bears on his shield an armed man climbing a scaling-ladder, and round is written, "Not Mars himself shall beat me from the towers." Against him Megareus, son of Creon, is matched with little fear.

The giant Hippomedon attacks the gates of Pallas. Upon his vast shield appears a Typhon breathing out fire and smoke; and like one of the frenzied followers of Bacchus, he rushes shouting to the war. To face this foe Eteocles has two champions. First, Pallas herself, who,

> "Holding near the gates
> Her hallowed state, abhors his furious rage;"—

and, of mortal combatants, the bold Hyperbius, whose shield is a good omen of his success. For, as Hippomedon displays the Typhon, so

> "Hyperbius bears
> The majesty of Jove securely throned,
> Grasping his flaming bolt, and who e'er saw
> The Thund'rer vanquished? In the fellowship
> Of friendly gods, the conquerors are with us,
> They with the conquered; and with like event
> These warriors shall engage. As Jove in fight
> Subdued the fell Typhœus, so his form
> Emblazoned on the shield shall guard Hyperbius."

Fifth, at the northern gates, a soft-cheeked youth is set—the girl-faced Parthenopæus, who has, none the less, the soul of a hero. His cognisance is no good omen for Thebes. It is the hateful Sphinx—the old enemy of the city—and she is represented as carrying a Theban in her clutches, and holding him up as a

mark for the enemy's arrows. Against him goes Actor, who will not boast, but do; "and I doubt not," says the king, "that he will keep the hateful monster outside the city, only to draw a more furious attack upon the man who carries her."

The sixth chief is Amphiaraus, the prophet, who knew from the first the fate that awaited the expedition. Even now he is rebuking Polynices bitterly for leading foreign arms against his native land.

> "How grateful to the gods must this deed be,
> Glorious to hear, and in the roll of fame
> Shining to distant ages, thus to lead
> These foreign arms to waste thy bleeding country,
> To raze those princely mansions where thy fathers,
> Heroes and demigods, once held their seats!"

And for himself he says:—

> "Prescient of fate I shall enrich this soil
> Sunk in the hostile plain. But let us fight.
> One thing at least is mine; I will not find
> A vulgar or dishonourable death."

The warrior-prophet alone bears no device upon his broad shield, for he

> "Wishes to be, not to appear, the best." *

Eteocles enlarges on the misery of the fate that makes a righteous man a companion of the wicked, and exposes him to a share in their punishment.

* When the play was produced at Athens this line was recognised as a description of Aristides, the actor turning towards him as he sat in the theatre, and the whole audience applauding the application.

Amphiaraus, the king thinks, will not engage at all; yet the veteran hero Lasthenes is sent out to face him.

And now comes the terrible part of the messenger's announcement:—

> "The seventh bold chief—forgive me that I name
> Thy brother, and relate the horrible vows,
> The imprecations which his rage pours forth
> Against the city; on fire to mount the walls,
> And from their turrets to this land proclaim,
> Rending its echoes with the song of war,
> Captivity: to meet thee sword to sword,
> Kill thee, then die upon thee."

His shield bears a golden figure of Justice, and the scroll—

> "Yet once more to his country, and once more
> To his paternal throne I will restore him."

Eteocles recognises the fulfilment of the imprecations uttered by Œdipus himself against his sons, but he determines unflinchingly to face the issue. Never was Justice, virgin child of Zeus, a teacher or friend of Polynices, and so his arrogant motto will not restore him.

> "In this confiding I will meet his arms
> In armèd opposition: who more fit?
> Chief shall engage with chief, brother with brother,
> And foe with foe. Haste, arm me for the fight;
> Bring forth my greaves, my hauberk, my strong spear!"

The Theban maidens beg their king not to incur the inexpiable guilt of fratricide. Let Theban fight with Theban; that blood can be washed away,—

"But death of brothers by each other slain,
That stain no expiation can atone."

To their entreaties the king opposes the claims of honour, and he faces the curse with the courage of despair.

"No; since the god impels me, I will on.
And let the race by Laius, let them all
Abhorred of Phœbus, in this storm of fate
Sink down to deep Cocytus' dreary flood."

The Chorus think that in calmer moments Eteocles will give up so wild a resolution; but his choice is deliberate, he sees the certain ruin, and goes out unhesitatingly to meet it.

The ode which follows strikes the key-note of the piece. The issue of the war is being determined at the seven gates, and meanwhile the Chorus express the anxiety of the spectators, and show how fully the past history of the royal house justifies the gloomiest apprehensions. We give the whole ode, as a good instance of the function of the Chorus in explaining the true moral significance of an event:—

"She comes, the fierce tremendous power,
And harrows up my soul with dread;
No gentle goddess, prompt to shower
Her blessings on some favoured head.
I know her now, the prophetess of ill,
And vengeance ratifies each word,
The votive fury, fiend abhorred,
The father's curses to fulfil.
Dreadful she comes, and with her brings
The brood of fate, that laps the blood of kings.

The rude barbarian, from the mines
Of Scythia, o'er the lots presides;
Ruthless to each his share assigns,
And the contested realm divides.
To each allots no wider a domain,
Than on the cold earth, as they lie,
Their breathless bodies occupy,
Regardless of an ampler reign.
Such narrow compass does the sword,
A cruel umpire, their high claims afford.

Conflicting thus in furious mood,
Should each by other's hand be slain,
Should the black fountain of their blood
Spout forth and drench the thirsty plain;
Who shall the solemn expiation pay?
Who with pure lavers cleanse the dead?
Miseries to miseries thus succeed,
And vengeance marks this house her prey,
Swift to chastise the first ill deed;
And the sons' sons in her deep fury bleed.

The first ill deed from Laius sprung;
Thrice from his shrine these words of fate
Awful the Pythian Phœbus sung,
'Die childless, wouldst thou save the state.'
Urged by his friends, as round the free wine flows,
To Love's forbidden rites he flies.
By the son's hand the father dies,
He in the chaste ground, whence he rose,
Was bold to implant the deadly root,
And madness reared each baleful spreading shoot.

Wide o'er misfortune's surging tide
Billows succeeding billows spread;

Should one, its fury spent, subside,
Another lifts its boist'rous head,
And foams around the city's shattered prow.
But should the rough tempestuous wave
Force through our walls, too slight to save,
And lay the thin partition low,
Will not the flood's resistless sway
Sweep kings and people, town and realms away?

The dreadful curse pronounced of old
To vengeance rouses ruthless hate;
And slaughter, ranging uncontrolled,
Pursues the hideous work of fate.
Wrecked in the storm, the great, the brave, the wise,
Are sunk beneath the roaring tide.
Such was the chief, this city's pride,
Dear to each god in yon bright skies,
Whose prudence took our dead away,
The ravening monster gorged with human prey.

Where now the chief? his glories where?
Fallen, fallen. From the polluted bed
Indignant madness, wild despair,
And agonising grief succeed.
The light of heaven, himself, his sons, abhorred,
Darkling he feeds his gloomy rage,
Bids them, with many a curse, engage
And part their empire with the sword.
That curse now holds its unmoved state,
The furious fiend charged with the work of fate."

The messenger returns. The city has escaped the yoke of slavery; the boasts of the mighty are fallen; and the vessel of the state having sprung no leak under all the assaults of the wave, now rides in calm

water. But sorrow is mingled with the general joy, for the royal brothers have fulfilled their father's curse; each has slain his brother, and with them is fallen the whole race of Laius.

This sorrow far outweighs the joy, at least with us, whose interest is mainly in the family of Œdipus. The rest of the play, accordingly, is full of lamentation till close upon the end, when Antigone, the sister of the dead brothers, claims our admiration; but even she, in announcing her heroic resolution, reminds us that there are still more woes in store for this devoted house. The Chorus chant a dirge, and while we listen to its music, a long procession of Theban citizens enters across the whole front of the stage, bearing the bodies of Eteocles and Polynices; after them come Antigone and Ismene her sister, with a long train of women wailing and lamenting. As the first mourners pass, the Chorus beat their breasts and heads with regular stroke in time to the music, which here assumes for a moment, without losing its sadness, the character of those strains by which the time was set for the rowers in an Athenian galley. They are echoing the beat of the oars in that ship of gloomy sanctity,

"Built in the eclipse, and rigged with curses dark,"

which is moving now over the waves of Acheron to the unseen land. Then the music changes to a distinct march, as Antigone and Ismene come with their procession of women, and take their places, as the men had done, upon the stage. The corpses of the two brothers are placed in front, and the women are grouped

behind them in robes of mourning, and behind these again stand the multitude of Theban citizens. As we contemplate this grand *tableau* of sorrow, the Chorus, divided into two bands, express the general feeling. The varied music gives interest and beauty to words which in themselves are dull and monotonous. Repetition is characteristic of lamentation. The mourner has only one feeling to express, and cares little to find new words to express it; he gets little further than, "O my son, Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!" But the song ends with words of rest, though it is the rest of the exhausted storm.

> "It falls, the royal house, it falls;
> Ruin lords it o'er the walls,—
> And the Furies howl around,
> Notes of shrill, soul-piercing sound.
> Slaughter reeking yet with gore,
> Raises high each gate before,
> Where they fought, and where they bled,
> Trophies of the mighty dead;
> And, the rival chief subdued,
> Ceases from her work of blood."

Then Antigone and Ismene come forward, and take up their places, Antigone by the corpse of Polynices, and Ismene by that of Eteocles; and there, in short answering cries, lament for their dead brothers. Here we see the systematic wailing of those mourning women, "the women and the minstrels making a noise," whose services were and still are constantly employed in the East. The words are nothing—it is the series of sudden piercing cries that so forcibly expresses grief.

Here the actual subject of the play could end; but we are not only to be satiated with calamity, but to expect more; and, what is better, the weakness of all this wailing is to be relieved by the heroism of Antigone. A herald comes upon the scene, bringing the decree of the elders of the city with regard to the burial of the two brothers. Eteocles is to be carried to the tomb with all honour, as a hero and patriot; but Polynices, as an enemy of his country, is to be cast out, unburied, to the birds and to the dogs. Such is the decree of the Theban rulers. Antigone replies:—

"And to the Theban rulers I declare,
If none besides dare bury him, myself
Will do that office, heedless of the danger,
And think no shame to disobey the state,
Paying the last sad duties to a brother.
Nature has tender ties, and strangely joins
The offspring of the same unhappy mother
And the same wretched father. In this task
Shrink not, my soul, to share the ills he suffered,
Involuntary ills; and while life warms
This breast be bold to show a sister's love
To a dead brother! Shall the famished wolves
Fatten on him? Away with such a thought!"

In spite of the state's repeated prohibition she persists in her resolve, and goes out at once to perform it. This is the closing scene. The two corpses are carried out separately, Antigone and half the Chorus following that of Polynices; the other half, with Ismene, that of Eteocles.

"To those that wait the fate of Polynices
Let the state act its pleasure. We will go
Attend his funeral rites, and aid his sister
To place him in the earth. Such sorrows move
The common feelings of humanity;
And when the deed is just the state approves it."

Such are the words of Antigone and her friends. The other train reply :—

"And we with him, as justice and the state
Concur to call us. Next th' immortal gods
And Jove's high power this valiant youth came forth
The guardian of his country, and repelled
Th' assault of foreign foes, whose raging force
Rushed like a torrent threatening to o'erwhelm us."

CHAPTER VII.

THE STORY OF ORESTES.

From the story of Thebes we pass now to Pelops' line, to contemplate there again the terrible course of divine displeasure once provoked against a family. Atreus, the son of Pelops, being wronged by his brother Thyestes, revenged himself by an act of treachery and impiety. He invited Thyestes to a banquet, in which the flesh of his own children was set before the unconscious father. The sun turned back in his course to avoid a sight so horrible, and from this time calamity never departed from that house, till an expiator was found in the person of Orestes. Agamemnon, who led the Greeks to Troy to revenge the injury of his brother Menelaus, was son of this impious Atreus. While he was waging war for ten years in Asia, his wife, Clytemnestra, was unfaithful to him, and admitted into his palace one Ægisthus, the son of the outraged Thyestes, who was destined bitterly to avenge his father's wrong upon the house of Atreus. The guilty pair determined to murder Agamemnon on his return, for both were afraid to

face him; and Clytemnestra had, besides, this charge against him, that he had sacrificed her daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis, whose wrath had kept the whole Grecian fleet becalmed at Aulis. Moreover, Agamemnon too was found unfaithful, for he brought with him Cassandra, the inspired daughter of Priam, to be his concubine. And so Agamemnon died, and Clytemnestra and Ægisthus reigned in Argos; but Orestes, son of Agamemnon, when he became a man, was charged by Apollo to avenge the murder of his father. And he obeyed, and killed both Ægisthus and his mother. Then the dark deities who pursue impious murderers drove the matricide in misery from land to land, until at last his cause was tried, and Apollo pleaded for him before the high court of Areopagus at Athens, and Minerva, the patron goddess of the city, gave the casting-vote that set him free. And so at last the curse was put away, and the Furies, who had been cruel powers, became beneficent, and a temple was assigned to them in Athens, and they were called the Kind Ones.

Such are the outlines of the story. In the "Agamemnon" is represented the death of the king; in the "Choephori," the vengeance of Orestes; in the "Eumenides," his trial and deliverance; the three plays thus forming one connected whole, or Trilogy. Since this Trilogy is universally regarded as one of the greatest works of human art, while some perhaps would admit no rival to it, we must try at the outset to show in what direction the features of its greatness are to be looked for.

Perhaps we do not sufficiently remember how real a person Agamemnon was to the Athenian audience. In Homer's verses, which were constantly in their mouths, he lived and moved as a familiar figure; they never doubted that he was all that Homer made him, chosen captain of the whole Grecian hosts, the first man in Greece (and Greece was the world), "the king of men." And here we are to see him in the hour of his triumph, the representative of Greece victorious over the barbarian world. And as the actors, from the first, are heroes great from their fame and position, so, as the play goes on, the action is caught up into the hands of the gods themselves, and we are admitted to see and hear Apollo, and Minerva, and the Furies. But this greatness of fame and position is something merely outward,—it serves to create a prejudice in favour of the persons, to insure attention to all they do or say; but their real greatness lies, of course, in their characters as depicted by the poet. In this direction we shall have to look for one of the chief elements of sublimity: in the force of intellect exhibited by the actors; the intensity—not violence, but restrained intensity—of the emotions expressed; and the strength of the wills which are shown conflicting. But even more than in the characters we must look for greatness in the action. There again there is an outer and an inner side. The mere death of Agamemnon is a tremendous event. "Kill a king, said'st thou?" A king in the old heroic days, when a real divinity hedged him round? The king of men himself? —

"The cease of Majesty
Dies not alone; but like a gulf, doth draw
What's near it with it; it is a massy wheel
Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortised and adjoined; which when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
Did the king sigh, but with a general groan." *

And the death of Clytemnestra and Ægisthus is a tremendous act of vengeance. A similar act forms the plot of one of Shakespeare's greatest plays; for Orestes is a Greek Hamlet, as Clytemnestra is the Greek Lady Macbeth. And in the last of the three plays the actions are important indeed. The solemn foundation of the Areopagus to be for ever a high court in Athens, the establishment of the Eumenides as guardians of the city, and the conducting of them with solemn pomp to their temple, were events, at least to an Athenian, of overpowering interest. But this is only the outside. The real plot consists in the course of divine providence, the working out of moral laws; and the unity of the whole Trilogy is best seen when we trace this plot throughout it. The veil is drawn aside which hides the dark forms of Erinnys and Atê from men's eyes as they scowl upon the sinner and dog his steps; as they stir up the powers that punish, or in their anger rear the fell brood of arrogance and impiety in their victim's home. And we are admitted, too, to see the conflict

* "Hamlet," Act iii. sc. 3.

between the bright gods of day and the powers of darkness; we are taught why men suffer, and how they may be healed. In the inner moral significance of the plot, then, we must look for the chief element of greatness. Nor is it fanciful to regard the play in this way, as if we were seeking for allegory or mystical interpretations; for the poet clearly treated his subject so, and meant his audience to receive it. The moral meaning of events is traced continuously, and openly expressed.

The reader will be able to judge for himself of the value of the answer which Æschylus gives to the great question of the origin of evil. How far does his solution fail in the several points which it attempts? Does it correspond with the facts? Does it justify God? Does it cheer man? Out of the depth of heathen darkness, from among the idols and the impure rites of pagan Greece, there comes up a gleam of light—light of explanation, light of reproof, light of encouragement. What is it worth? Does it seem to be a faint remnant of some old revelation, diluted, refracted, discoloured, but still a remnant of the truth? Or is it a spark of promise—a beginning which is to burst into fuller light some day? This question is surely most important. If we consider how much modern Europe owes to these Greeks who applauded Æschylus, we cannot but inquire with the deepest interest into the degree and character of their moral enlightenment. And on this point no information is more valuable than that which the tragedians give us; and this Trilogy is, of all tragedies, the most instructive.

Once more, to consider the main drift of these plays.

We are so much accustomed to regard each man as responsible for his own sins, and these only, that we are inclined to forget how much is to be said for a different view—to forget that children bear the iniquity of their parents. Now here is a nation full of the joy of life, and full also of careful and wondering reflection —just like a child, in fact, in both; and this nation gives us—or one of its greatest minds gives us—as its experience, that a man is not entirely responsible for his own deeds, but is impelled by temptation which comes on him in punishment of his father's crimes. The moral unit, so to speak, is a house, not a man. A family sins, and a family is punished. The gods then are just, though their course of action presses hardly on the individual. But where is the hope? The Prometheus and the Eumenides seem to give it. On the one hand, suffering at last expiates, and vengeance can be satisfied; on the other hand, a constant and conscientious pursuit of duty may obtain remission. These two points are shown thus. When Orestes is set free, not only has the house of Pelops suffered enough to satisfy the justice of the gods, but Orestes, by his careful execution of all divine commands, has been the means of carrying out the divine will, and restoring, as it were, the moral balance. He has awarded to each his exact due, whether of punishment or respect; he has given to piety and to vengeance their right proportion; and when the balance is restored, nothing is wanting except certain ceremonies to complete his expiation.

Now we may think what we will about the right-

ness or wrongness of this view of morals, but we are compelled to notice, with respect as well as pity, that the Greeks, our teachers, once thought thus; and to consider how dismal was the state of a man who ever feared that some Fury, resistless and malignant, was urging him to a ruin which he could not but rush into. How little hope the individual could draw from his confidence that in the end all would come right, seeing that, although the race might be restored, the individual was to perish by the way!

But the sadder all this is the fitter it is for tragedy; and if we have in any degree realised it, we shall the better see the terrible grandeur of the powers which Æschylus shows us at work in Clytemnestra and Agamemnon.

But let us go into the theatre and see it all for ourselves. First comes the "Agamemnon"—the "Macbeth of antiquity," as Milman calls it; "as noble a tragedy," says Professor Wilson, "as ever went sweeping by across the floor of a stage."

The busy conversation of the crowd is hushed, the curtain is removed, and the play begins. A stately palace, built of vast stones, such as were

> "Piled by the hands of giants
> For godlike kings of old,"

forms the background of the scene; and upon a lonely tower on its outer wall a watchman lies, resting on his arm, and "looking forth into the night." For ten long years he has watched there, with his eyes towards Troy; for Agamemnon had promised, when he went

away, to send, as soon as Troy should fall, a message of beacon-fires to tell the good news to his wife in Argos. The watchman has hardly spoken before we feel, from his weariness, how long the war has lasted, and how long Clytemnestra's faithfulness has been tried. Night after night he has watched the stars, and passed the damp cold hours in sleepless weariness, striving at times to beguile his loneliness with song; but at all such times gaiety has been driven away—by what?

> "Still, as I strive to guile the unquiet night—
> Sad remedy!—with song or carol gay,
> I can but weep and mourn this fatal house,
> Not as of old with righteous wisdom ruled." *

While he is speaking, far away out on the right of the stage a bright flame shoots up: it is the beacon's blaze. "All hail," the watchman cries,—

> "All hail, thou glory of the night! that blazest
> With noon-day splendour, wakening Argos up
> To dance and song for this thrice-blest event!"

He will go to tell the queen of the good news,—good news, and yet,—

> "But peace! no more! the seal is on my lips!
> The palace' self, could it but find a voice,
> Would speak from its dark walls! To the understanding
> I speak; to those who understand not—nothing."

Already we begin to fear that some storm is coming.

* The translations throughout the "Agamemnon" are by Dean Milman.

The watchman is gone, and the Chorus, twelve old Argive senators, troop in and take their place. No sounds of all that we have heard in the preceding plays seem to equal the grandeur of this half-triumphant, half-desponding song. The Greek fleet sail forth proudly, led by the "twin-throned, twin-sceptred pair," Menelaus and Agamemnon,—

> "And loud and fierce their battle-clang,
> Like screams of angry vultures rang,"

as they go, heaven-sent, to punish Paris, and bring alike on Greece and Troy

> "Many a wild and wearying strife,
> With failing knees bowed to the dust,
> And lances shivering in their onward thrust."

Then the sad prophetic note is struck again :—

> "But be the issue as it may,
> Eternal fate will hold its way;
> Nor lips that pray, nor eyes that weep,
> Nor cups that rich libations steep,
> Soothe those dark Powers' relentless ire,
> Whose altars never flame with hallowed fire."

And now the whole city is seen ablaze with the fires of sacrifice, and the Chorus guesses that Clytemnestra has received the long-wished-for tidings. While they wait, eager to hear if this be so, their song takes up the story of the journey of the fleet to Troy.

An awful portent had appeared on the way to the two monarchs. Two eagles, while the host was starting, were seen close by the palace, preying on a hare,

the favourite of Artemis. And Calchas, the seer, read the omen thus: "Troy will fall before the sons of Atreus, but a shade hangs over their proud array, for Artemis is angry at the eagles' feast;" and though the prophet prayed that the omen might be averted, yet the gloomy burden peals out startlingly:—

"Ring out the dolorous hymn, yet triumph still the good!"

Calchas prayed that the injured goddess might not in anger delay the fleet, and force upon the chiefs

"That other sacrifice—
That darker sacrifice, unblest
By music or by jocund feast:
Whence sad domestic strife shall rise,
And, dreadless of her lord, fierce woman's hate;
Whose child-avenging wrath in sullen state
Broods, wily housewife, in her chamber's gloom,
Over that unforgotten doom.

Such were the words that Calchas clanged abroad,
When crossed those ominous birds the onward road
Of that twice royal brotherhood:
A mingled doom
Of glory and of gloom.
Ring out the dolorous hymn, yet triumph still the good!"

Ominous, indeed, is the starting; and the mind, oppressed with apprehension, turns to think of the holy powers that govern all these things. Zeus it is who rules unrivalled. Two dynasties of gods have fallen before him; and still his lesson to mortals is, "Learning through Sorrow." Dark and sad it all seems

now, and wisdom when it comes will be the wisdom of remorse.

The fears of Calchas were too well founded. On Chalcis' coast, by Aulis' rock-bound shore, winds came that kept the fleet in unwelcome rest, and famine and weariness wasted the strength of Greece. At last the seer spoke out in the name of Artemis, and called for a virgin's blood, the blood of Iphigenia. It was a hard choice for Agamemnon,—

> "Dire doom! to disobey the Gods' commands!
> More dire, my child, mine house's pride, to slay,
> Dabbling in virgin blood a father's hands."

But necessity is overpowering,—

> "So he endured to be the priest
> In that child-slaughtering rite unblest,
> The first-fruit offering of that host
> In fatal war for a bad woman lost.
> The prayers, the mute appeal to her hard sire,
> Her youth, her virgin beauty,
> Nought heeded they, the Chiefs for war on fire.
> So to the ministers of that dire duty
> (First having prayed) the father gave the sign,
> Like some soft kid, to lift her to the shrine.
>
> There lay she prone,
> Her graceful garments round her thrown;
> But first her beauteous mouth around
> Their violent bonds they wound,
> Lest her dread curse the fated house should smite
> With their rude inarticulate might.
> But she her saffron robe to earth let fall:
> The shaft of pity from her eye

Transpierced that awful priesthood—one and all.
Lovely as in a picture stood she by
As she would speak. Thus at her father's feasts
The virgin, 'mid the revelling guests,
Was wont with her chaste voice to supplicate
For her dear father an auspicious fate."

At the end of this sad story the Chorus cease. This omen was but too true; yet it is no gain, they say, to know the future—it is only antedating sorrow. Yet may better days come now.

Such hopes are little better than forebodings.

That beautiful picture of the death of Iphigenia has been the theme of many poets. Euripides has a tragedy upon it—the "Iphigenia in Aulis;" and among the Romans, Lucretius has described it finely, translating and almost improving the two tragedians, as an instance of the evils to which religion has prompted men; and Tennyson has drawn the whole in a few lines with intense vividness, in his "Dream of Fair Women."

"With the sound of these prophetic strains yet in their ears, the Chorus sees the approach of—Clytemnestra. Their strain has prepared us for something dreadful in the face and figure of the avenging Queen,—

'For ne'er was mortal sound so full of woe.'

She comes—and then we have such a description as makes the glow-worm light of modern poetry

'Pale its ineffectual fires.'

She comes rejoicingly, exultingly—floating on stately and beautiful in her revenge—of which the passion, about to

be satiated and appeased, breaks out into a glorious burst, that shows how sin and wickedness can make a Poetess of the Highest Order.

She tells the Chorus that Troy has been taken, and they ask, 'How long ago? When was the city sacked?' She replies, ''Twas in the night that bore this rising light.' The Chorus, incredulous, asks again, 'But how? What messenger could come so fast?' And this is her glorious reply:"*—

"The Fire-God, kindling his bright light on Ida!
Beacon to beacon fast and forward flashed,
An estafette of fire, on to the rocks
Of Hermes-hallowed Lemnos: from that isle
Caught, thirdly, Jove-crowned Athos the red light,
That broader, skimming o'er the shimmering sea,
Went travelling in its strength. For our delight
The pine-torch, golden-glittering like the sun,
Spoke to the watchman on Macistus' height.
Nor he delaying, nor by careless sleep
Subdued, sent on the fiery messenger:
Far o'er Euripus' tide the beacon-blaze
Signalled to the Messapian sentinels.
Light answering light, they sent the tidings on,
Kindling into a blaze the old dry heath;
And mightier still, and waning not a whit,
The light leaped o'er Asopus' plain, most like
The crescent moon, on to Cithæron's peak,
And woke again another missive fire.
Nor did the guard disdain the far-seen light,
But kindled up at once a mightier flame.

* From Professor Wilson's critique on the "Agamemnon," appended to his 'Homer and his Translators.' W. Blackwood & Sons.

O'er the Gorgopian lake it flashed like lightning
On the sea-beaten cliffs of Megaris;
Woke up the watchman not to spare his fire,
And, gathering in its unexhausted strength,
The long-waving bearded flame from off the cliffs
That overlook the deep Saronian gulf,
As from a mirror streamed. On flashed it; reached
Arachne, our close neighbouring height, and there,
Not unbegotten of that bright fire on Ida,
On sprang it to Atrides' palace-roof.
Such were the laws of those swift beacon-fires:
So flash the torches on from hand to hand
In the holy rite, brightest the first and last.
Such is the proof and sign of victory
Sent by my husband from now captured Troy."

The reader will recognise here the original of Macaulay's "Armada." Indeed that poem gives, better than any translation, the spirit and dash and picturesqueness of the passage; from the kindling of the first beacon on Mount Edgecombe's height,—

"Till Belvoir's lordly terraces the sign to Lincoln sent,
And Lincoln sped the message on o'er the wide vale of Trent;
Till Skiddaw saw the fire that burned on Gaunt's embattled pile,
And the red glare on Skiddaw roused the burghers of Carlisle."

Then Clytemnestra describes what she imagines to be the scene in Troy, where the cries of the vanquished, as wives and children weep over the bodies of the slain, are mingled in discord with the shouts of the plunder-

ing conquerors. No longer forced to sleep on the damp ground, the victors take their ease in the Trojan palaces; but even in their success there is danger of that pride which brings reverses. All is not safe yet; the dangers of return are to be encountered, and even then, if any new offence should be committed, Troy may yet be avenged.

The irony is scarcely concealed.

Now comes a new choric song, a prayer to Zeus, whose judgments cannot fail; who against Paris "bent his bow and made it ready,"—decreed and it was done; who "marks that race from son to son" that dares too much, and grows insolent in over-great prosperity. In moderation is the only safety. Then is described the curse that Paris brought on Troy when Helen came:—

Strophe.

"Bequeathing the wild fray to her own nation
Of clashing spears, and the embattled fleet,
Bearing to Troy her dowry—desolation,
She glided through the gate with noiseless feet,
Daring the undareable! But in their grief
Deep groaned the prophets of that ancient race:
'Woe to the palace! woe to its proud Chief,
The bed warm with the husband's fond embrace!'
Silent there she stood,
Too false to honour, too fair to revile;
For her, far off over the ocean flood,
Yet still most lovely in her parting smile,
A spectre queens it in that haunted spot.
Odious, in living beauty's place,
Is the cold statue's fine-wrought grace.
Where speaking eyes are wanting, love is not."

Antistrophe.

"And phantasms, from his deep distress unfolding,
Are ever present with their idle charms.
And when that beauteous form he seems beholding,
It slides away from out his clasping arms.
The vision! in an instant it is gone,
On light wing down the silent paths of sleep!
Around that widowed heart, so mute, so lone.
Such are the griefs, and griefs than these more deep
To all from Greece that part
For the dread warfare: Patient in her gloom,
Sits Sorrow, guardian god of each sad home,
And many woes pierce rankling every heart.
Oh, well each knew the strong, the brave, the just,
Whom they sent forth on the horrid track
Of battle; and what now comes back?
Their vacant armour, and a little dust!"

And the sorrow for friends thus lost rises in an ominous murmur against the sons of Atreus, who led the flower of Greece to die in a strange land, in a woman's quarrel. The heavy burden of a people's curse suggests fears that may not be spoken. And again and again in new words the old burden is repeated:—when men are highest in pride, then Erinnys comes, and heaven's thunder bursts first on the over-glorious:—

"Mine be the unenvied fate,
Not too wealthy, not too great.
I covet not, not I, the bad renown
To be the sacker of another's town,
Or see, a wretched slave, the sacking of mine own."

All doubts that remain about the truth of the beacon-message are now dispelled by the arrival of a herald, who comes from the army itself. He is the fore-runner of Agamemnon, and all that he says is intended to enhance the greatness of the king's arrival. He salutes, in touching words, his country and her gods, and the palace of Agamemnon, which now shines its best to welcome its monarch, who comes like dawn out of darkness.

"Greet, greet him nobly. Is't not well to greet
Him who the firm foundations of old Troy
Dug up with the avenging spade of Jove,
Searching the soil down to its deepest roots?
The altars and the temples of their Gods
Are all in shapeless ruin; all the seed
Utterly withered from the blasted land.
Such is the yoke, that o'er the towers of Troy
Hath thrown that elder chieftain, Atreus' son.
Blest above mortals, lo, he comes! Of men
Now living, who so worthy of all honour?"

The leader of the Chorus tells the herald how the army has been ruined, and speaks of some undefined fear. And the herald says, "All suffer in turn, but it is well at last." He describes most graphically the sufferings of the besieging host:—

"Our beds were strewn under the hostile walls;
And from the skies, and from the fenny land,
Came dripping the chill dews, rotting our clothes,
Matting our hair, like hides of shaggy beasts.
Our winters shall I tell, when the bleak cold
Intolerable, down from Ida's snows

Came rushing; even the birds fell dead around us.
Or summer heats, when on his mid-day couch
Heavily fell the waveless sea, no breath
Stirring the sultry air. Why grieve we now?
All is gone by! the toils all o'er! the dead!
No thought have they of rising from their graves.
Why count the suffrages of those who have fallen?
The living only, fickle fortune's wrath
Afflicts with grief. I to calamity
Have bid a long farewell. Of the Argive host
To us, the few survivors, our rich gains
Weigh down in the scale our poor uncounted losses.
In the face of the noon-day sun we make our boast,
Flying abroad over the sea and land,
That now the Argive host hath taken Troy;
And in the ancestral temples of their Gods
Hath nailed the spoils for our eternal glory."

Clytemnestra now comes forward with expressions of exuberant delight; but she never quite hides from us, who are in the secret, the true purpose of her relentless heart. "What day," she cries, "so bright, so blessed, as when the wife greets her returning husband! Throw wide the gates of welcome; go and meet him, and tell him that his wife is waiting for him, unchanged and unchangeable! No pleasure have I known but the thought of him, and have watched, like a faithful guardian, over his treasures and his honours." She retires. All has now been done to raise our expectation for the arrival of the king. He is to come at the height of his triumph, and his wife will greet him with enthusiastic welcome. So now the undertone of sorrow is heard again. The herald tells of storms that have harassed

the army on its return, and of the many warriors who can never regain their homes. But with good hopes he goes away, and again the choral song peals in our ears. Again it is of Helen, "the fated to destroy," whose very name meant "ruin."

"To Ilion in beauty came
The wedded mischief! of her name
The wrath of the great Gods on high
Fulfilled the awful augury;
The hoarded vengeance long preparing
For that deed of guilty daring:
Dishonour of the stranger-welcoming board,
And Jove, the Hospitable God and lord.
The brothers of the house, that princely throng,
With the glad hymenean song,
Hymned the eve of that bright wedding-day.
That hymn unlearned, a sadder lay
Shall Priam's ancient city chant anon—
The many-voicèd wail and moan,
In evil hour o'er Paris led
To that disastrous bridal-bed:
Foredoomed t' endure the flood
For years poured wasteful of her citizens' blood."

So a man cherishes a lion's cub, and it is gentle at first and loving, the children's toy, the old man's pleasure; but ere long the lion-nature shows itself, and it proves a priest of Atè, and spreads blood and ruin through the house. So Helen

"Too soon in Troy, her coming seemed to be
Like gentle calm over the waveless sea;
She stood, an image of bright wealth untold.

Oblique from her soft eye the dart
Preyed sweetly on the inmost heart,
Making love's flower its tenderest bloom unfold.
So changing with the changing hours
That wedlock brought her to a bitter end,
A cruel sister, and a cruel friend,
To Priam's daughters in their chamber bowers:
By Hospitable Jove sent in his ire,
No tender bride, rather a Fury dark and dire."

And still the burden is repeated. Wealth brings a misery that never dies, but breeds a brood of evils ever growing. Beneath the quiet cottage-roof dwells Justice, and "decent life flows peaceful on;" but over the gilded palace is spread the funeral pall of Atè.

Agamemnon enters.

Earthly greatness and triumph are at their height, as the chief returns, with chariots and retinue, to his palace. The Chorus welcome him as he deserves:—

"Hail, king of Atreus' race renowned,
Who Troy hast levelled with the ground!
How to address thee—how adore;"

but they are anxious to observe a safe moderation in their congratulations;—

"Nor with exceeding praise run o'er,
Nor turning short, pass by too light
The mark and standard of thy might."

They confess that at first his enterprise seemed rash, but now success has justified his daring. Time always reveals true wisdom.

The welcome is, after all, not so enthusiastic as it might be.

The king greets his native land and his country's gods, and describes the state of the defeated city. He is grand as he stands there, a true representative of the heroic age, and tells us how Atè's hurricane howls through the smoking town, and how the Greek nobles leapt forth from the fatal horse.

> "The roaring lion rampant o'er the towers
> Sprang, glutting his fierce maw with kingly blood."

But still the king of men remembers the dangers of prosperity, and tempers his exultation with regret for the calamities of many of his friends. He is just about to go modestly into his palace without pomp, when the traitress, gorgeously decked out to meet her husband, enters on the scene.

"According to the simplicity," says Potter, "of ancient manners, Clytemnestra should have waited to receive her husband in the house; but her affected fondness led her to disregard decorum. Nothing can be conceived more artful than her speech; but that shows that her heart had little share in it; her pretended sufferings during his absence are touched with great delicacy and tenderness; but had they been real, she would not have stopped him with the querulous recital; the joy for his return, had she felt that joy, would have broke out first; this is deferred to the latter part of her address; then, indeed, she has amassed every image expressive of emotion; but her solicitude to assemble these leads her beyond nature, which expresses her strong passions in broken sentences, and with a nervous brevity, not with the cold formality of a set harangue. Her last

words are another instance of the double sense which expresses reverence to her husband, but intends the bloody design with which her soul was agitated." *

"Men! citizens! Elders of Argos' state!
I blush not in your presence to pour forth
All a wife's fondness for her lord beloved;
For timorous bashfulness soon dies away
Before familiar faces. Not from others
Learning, but only from mine own sad knowledge
Will I describe my solitary life,
While he was far away under Troy's walls."

She describes at great length how she suffered from rumours of her lord's death; how she had three times tried to hang herself; how her eyes had been dried up with weeping, and her short sleep broken by miserable dreams. As Dean Milman says,

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

Then she addresses the king in terms of over-artful panegyric:—

"Thou, watchdog of the unattainted fold!
The main-stay that secures the straining ship!
The firm-based pillar, bearing the lofty roof!
The only son to childless father born!
Land by the lost despairing sailor seen!
Day beaming beautiful after fierce storms!
Cool fountain to the thirsty traveller!"

But she will lead him to the pitch of pride, that his fall may be complete: she will make him impious that the gods may be against him.

* Quoted by Professor Wilson, *loc. cit.*

"Stay, nor set
On the bare earth, O King, thy hallowed foot,
That which hath trampled upon ruined Troy.
Why tarry ye, my damsels? 'Tis your office
To strew the path with gorgeous carpetings;
Like purple pavement rich be all his way;
That justice to his house may lead him in—
The house he little dreamed of. All the rest
Leave to my care, that may not sleep. So please
The Gods, what's justly destined shall be done."

Irony cannot be carried further.

Agamemnon, however, is not easily flattered to his ruin, and he refuses an honour fit only for the gods.

"Treat me not like a soft and delicate woman,
Nor, gazing open-mouthed, grovelling on earth
Like a barbarian, raise discordant cry:
Nor, strewing with bright tapestries my way,
Make me an envy to all-jealous Heaven.
These are the proud prerogatives of the Gods;
That mortal thus should walk on rich embroideries
Beseems not: do it I cannot without awe.
As a man, honour me, not as a God!
Though she wipe not her feet on carpetings,
Nor variegated garments fine, Fame lifts
High her clear voice. To be of humble mind
Is God's best gift. Blessed is only he
Who in unbroken happiness ends his days.
Still may I prosper, thus not overbold."

But at last he is persuaded to tread the purple, though he insists on removing his sandals for the sake of humility. He steps upon the carpet: we feel that he is doomed. One more touch has to be added; the

one thing that might justly provoke the queen is to be done. He leads forth Cassandra, and with kind considerate words recommends her to Clytemnestra's care.

"But thou this stranger-maid
Lead in with courteous welcome. The high Gods
On him who rules his slaves with gentleness
Look gracious: for to bear the yoke of slavery
Is a sore trial to the struggling will.
And she, of our rich spoils the chosen flower,
The army's precious gift, follows me here.
And since to yield to thee I am compelled,
Walking on purple, enter I the palace."

The queen does not notice this request. She repeats her protestations that no profusion could be too great to welcome such a prince, or to express her joy; and then she joins exultingly in the procession which leads him in. And her parting words are these:—

"Jove! Jove! that all things perfectest, my prayers
Bring to perfection! to perfection bring
What thou hast yet to do! Be this thy care."

The grand procession here enters the palace, and the stage is left vacant, except that Cassandra is still there, sitting silent in her chariot. But the notes of melancholy music call our eyes from the stage to the orchestra, where the Chorus is moving in mysterious figures about the altar, where it stands down beneath us on the floor of the theatre. Fear—resistless inexplicable fear—is now the burden of their song; so that, though their own eyes have seen the safe return of the

army, yet a sense of danger and calamities to come still overpowers them—an apprehension connected in some way with that dread of excessive wealth which they have expressed so often. Cassandra is not inattentive to their forebodings: her gestures show that she shares them. But now Clytemnestra comes out again. She bids the captive prophetess, sternly but not insultingly, to accept her lot, and enter the palace as a slave. For a long time Cassandra listens in silence to the queen's command and the advice of the Chorus, her look growing every moment wilder, and her gestures more excited. At last she speaks, and cries again and again to Apollo, the author of her unhappy inspiration, of her sad prophecies that have been always disregarded, and with each repetition her ravings portend more clearly the dreadful deed that is to come. She looks round in horror at the palace-gates, and cries,—

"Dwelling accurst of God!
Dark home of murder and infanticide!
The lord lies slaughtered in that drear abode,
And the dank floor with bloody dew is dyed."

She calls to mind the impious feast of Thyestes, and speaks not dimly of another crime to come. Her beautiful face is disfigured with passion; her hair "streams like a meteor on the troubled air," as the vision forces itself more and more vividly on her reluctant soul. She sees the murderess raise her hand; she sees the bath in which the deed is done, and the Furies punishing the guilty queen. And her own fate, too, is before her:—

"Alas! alas! for myself I fear
Mine own death-hour of agony!
Oh, wherefore do ye lead me here?
Oh, wherefore, but with him to die?"

Each wild utterance of Cassandra is followed by a short song from the orchestra in comment on her words. "Why," asks the Chorus,—

"Why heaven-struck, heaping ill on ill,
Pour'st thou thy frantic sorrows vain?
Why shrieks thy voice, ill-omened still,
Its awful burthen in awakening strain?
Why roams thy sad prophetic song
Only the paths of grief along?"

Again she is tortured with visions of the past scenes of horror that have defiled the house of Pelops. The murdered children of Thyestes pass before her eyes, with the same terrible distinctness with which the children and the eight kings force themselves on the fancy of Macbeth:—

"See, see ye not upon yon palace-roofs,
Like shapes in dreams, they stand and jibber there,
The children murdered by their nearest kin?
Lo, there they are, in their full-laden hands
Entrails and bowels, horrible food, on which
Their fathers have been feasting."

Vengeance is coming for these things upon the house of Atreus; and though the she-wolf welcomes her lord with flattering words, yet death is certainly prepared for him. There is no longer any concealment. Cassandra foretells in plain words the crime of Clytem-

nestra, and the excuse she will allege; and at last she tears the prophet-garlands from her head, and dashes down her wand in the dust, hating her unhappy task of uttering warnings that are fated to be disbelieved. Yet she will not die unavenged, for even now she sees the long-exiled son Orestes return, and claim satisfaction for his father's death.

Suddenly, while speaking for a moment more calmly to the Chorus, Cassandra starts back in horror. "Foh!" she cries,—

"Foh! how the house smells with the reek of blood!"

Fluttered like a bird with terror, she yet restrains herself to utter one last prayer for vengeance, one last reflection on the fickleness of fortune, and then goes into the palace to meet her death.

For a minute we are left to consider this wonderful scene of madness; to reflect on its strange medley of emotions, where Ophelia's tenderness and Lear's frenzy are gathered into one, and joined with the agony of foresight of Lochiel's Seer; while the Chorus moralises still over the danger of prosperity. Suddenly a cry is heard within,—

"Woe's me, I'm stabbed! stabbed with a mortal blow!"

Again and again it is repeated, as the majestic voice of Agamemnon, that so often rose above the din of battle, sounds fainter and fainter in the agony of death. The deed is done.

In the orchestra utter confusion prevails, for each member of the Chorus has some different advice to

urge, and they start up and rush to and fro in restless excitement. But in a moment all is hushed into the silence of awe.

The back of the stage opens, and the very scene of the murder is brought forth to view. Terrible in her triumph, the bloody axe still in her hands, Clytemnestra is seen standing over her husband's corpse. For all her wickedness still a queen, she stands up boldly and dares to defend her deed :—

" This is no unpremeditated strife :
Over this ancient feud I have brooded long,
That the slow time at length hath brought to pass.
Here stand I, as I smote. 'Twas I that slew him!
Thus, thus I did it! Nought will I deny!
That he could not defend himself, nor 'scape.
As round the fish the inextricable net
Closes, in his rich garments' fatal wealth
I wrapt him. Then once, twice, I smote him home.
Twice groaned he, then stretched out his failing limbs ;
And as he lay I added a third blow ;
And unto Hades, the dark god below,
Warden of the dead, made my thanksgiving vow.
So, fallen thus, he breathed out his proud life,
And spouted forth such a quick rush of blood,
It splashed me o'er with its black gory dew.
Yet not the less rejoiced I, than the flower
Within the pregnant folds of its sweet cup
Rejoices in the dropping dews of heaven.
Being as it is, ye Argive elders all,
If that ye too feel joy, rejoice with me,
And I protest that were it meet to make
Libations for the dead, 'tis I would make them :
For all that's done is just—is more than just.

He that hath filled the chalice of this house
With cursing and with woe, on his return
Himself should drink it to the very dregs."

The Chorus, the elders of her people, condemn her straightway to be outcast and abhorred; but she still defends herself and defies them, relying on the help of Ægisthus, her accomplice.

"And now hear ye my stern, my solemn oath:—
By Justice, the avenger of my child;
By Atè, by Erinnys, at whose shrine
I have offered up this man, slain by mine hand!
I look not in the house of fear to dwell,
So long as on my hearth kindles his fire
Ægisthus, as of old my constant friend:
He to my daring is no slender shield.
Low lies the man who hath done shameful wrong
To me his wife; he, once the dear delight
Of the fair Chryseid, 'neath the walls of Troy;
And her his captive, her his prophetess,
The sharer of his bed, his soothsayer,
His faithful consort on his couch of sleep,
And on the deck, under the groaning masts.
For this these two have paid the rightful price—
He as ye see him; she, like the sweet swan,
Singing her farewell song, her own sad dirge,
Lies here, his paramour, the delicate morsel,
Intruded here, where I should feast alone."

The Ruin which the gods, in their mysterious will, sent down upon the race of Pelops stands before us visible in Clytemnestra. Looked at from the human side, she is an incarnation of consummate wickedness,

triumphant and unashamed ; from the divine side she is a messenger of Atè and Erinnys, filled full with their terrible displeasure, the most awful object that could meet the eyes of bewildered and despairing mortals. Through a long series of short answering chants her consciousness of this dread mission is contrasted with the timid horror of the Chorus. After attributing the whole line of sorrows to Helen, and wailing over Cassandra's death, the Chorus calls upon the Alastor, the unforgetting fury,—

> "That Dæmon dread,
> Whose wrath hangs heavy o'er the head
> Of each of that predestined line ;
> A name, the omen and the sign
> Of endless and insatiate misery."

And Clytemnestra takes up the strain :—

> "Say not 'twas Agamemnon's wife
> That so cut short his fated life,
> It was the Alastor, whose dread mien
> Took up the likeness of the queen.
> Of that dark house 'twas he, 'twas he,
> The curse and awful Destiny ;
> (Where, father of that race unblest,
> Old Atreus held his cannibal feast ;)
> Wreaking for that dread crime the vengeance due,
> The full-grown man for those poor babes he slew."

But the Chorus will not admit her defence, and mourn in indignation for the kingly head laid low by such foul treachery. Still the queen asserts the justice of her deed :—

"It was not so; that man of pride!
By no unseemly death he died.
Who first into our household brought
Dark Atè's snares? who earliest taught
That fateful lesson of deceit,
Decoying forth that child of many tears,
Iphigenia, in her tender years?
Evil he did, evil is vengeance meet!
He will not make his insolent boast in Hell;
For with the sword he smote, and by the sword he fell."

And ever the Chorus returns to its wailings and accusations:—

"Woe, woe! earth, earth! wilt thou not swallow me
Ere I am forced my kingly lord to see
Within that bath, with silver walled,
On his low bed unhonoured and unpalled?
Oh, who will bury him?
Oh, who will mourn for him?
Wilt thou, wilt thou, thou daring one, presume—
Thou, thine own husband's bloody murderess!—
To stand and wail as mourner by his tomb?
With graceless grace, unholy holiness,
For noble funeral rites the unblest offerings bless."

And still the murderess "keeps her fixed unaltered mood."

This is in the true spirit of Athenian tragedy. Lady Macbeth, before her crime, is a very Clytemnestra; she welcomes Duncan with the same exaggerated courtesy, and is as resolute in her purpose; but afterwards she trembles and turns pale. Shakespeare is painting human nature, weak and fickle even in the

strongest; Æschylus is showing us the wrath of gods, which is simple, direct, and unrepenting.

At length, in the end of the play, Ægisthus himself appears, and he exhibits the character of a violent and cowardly tyrant. He congratulates himself shamelessly on his success, and shows how his father Thyestes is avenged. "Now," he says,—

> "Now, 'twere a glorious thing for me to die,
> Seeing him caught in justice' iron toils."

The Chorus threaten him with the curse of the people and with stoning; but Ægisthus despises the elders of his city, and confidently asserts his ill-gotten power. Violence is on the point of being used, when Clytemnestra interposes. She pacifies Ægisthus with tenderest words—"purring," says Professor Wilson, "like a satiated tigress round her prey;" and while the Chorus threaten them with the possible return of Orestes, she leads her accomplice in "to set in order all things in that ancient kingly house." Truly they are sadly out of order at present.

The first part of the great threefold drama is over, and while we sit waiting for the next, there can be no want of reflections to occupy our minds. The conversation which ordinarily fills up such intervals in the performance can hardly find place now, for all minds have been oppressed with a weight of awe which does not easily pass away. A confused mass of giant forms and deeds of blood is before our eyes, and mingled tones

of triumph and despair are still ringing in our ears. But gradually, as we gaze, the several parts sink back into due proportion, and gradually there comes out into distinctness the supremely great figure of Clytemnestra. It grows up before us more and more vividly as we recall one grand speech after another,—as we remember how she exulted at the thought of her husband's return; how great she was in the defiant extravagance with which she spread his path; how fearfully wicked in her unflinching hypocrisy; how she despised Ægisthus, for whom she had done it all. And then, by her side, we begin to see clearly the noble stature of Agamemnon, and pity, which was suppressed awhile in awe at Clytemnestra, possesses us again.

Is all that villany to triumph, and all that nobleness to perish unavenged? But as we go over in memory the closing scenes, the thought arises of Orestes. What is he doing now? Growing up to manhood in a distant land, and meditating vengeance. He goes to sacred Delphi and consults Apollo, and is bidden to hasten to Argos and kill his mother and her guilty lover. And how are affairs in Argos? The palace is full of Trojan captives; Electra herself, Agamemnon's daughter, is little better than a slave; while hatred has been gradually growing against Ægisthus and the queen, till there are many who long, hardly in secret, to see the face of the avenger.

But the herald's voice proclaims that the next play is to begin, and the curtain falls for the "Choephori, or Libation-bearers." Still the scene is the royal palace

of Argos, but in front of it now is seen the tomb of Agamemnon. We seem to breathe a lighter, freer atmosphere than that which echoed to the dread choruses of the Argive elders or the shriek of the dying king. A brighter, more beautiful vision is before us. Orestes comes upon the scene in his pride of youth, which sadness cannot obscure. His face and his dress may betoken mourning, but in his whole person shines out the symmetry and the brilliance of white skin and lustrous hair which is seen in the young Greek in the wrestling-schools of Athens. He comes forward to his father's tomb, and solemnly offers there two locks of his hair,—the first to Inachus, the river-god of his home, a sign of gratitude for life and nurture; the second to his dead father, as an offering of love, instead of that which he was not allowed to pay at the time of his funeral. This done, he stands apart, and with him Pylades, his faithful companion, who all this time has remained in silence at his side. They stand apart to watch, for the palace-gates are opened, and a train of black-robed women comes out, led by Electra. They are bearing urns with mixed meal and oil and honey, to be poured as libations, or drink-offerings, on the tomb. Orestes at once recognises his sister, and guesses the object of their coming.

Electra remains upon the stage close by the tomb; while the Chorus, these captive women, walk down the broad steps which lead from the stage into the orchestra, and take their stations there to sing. They remain, however, so near the stage as to be at all times

close, like Electra, to the tomb. And thus their chant begins :—

"Sent from the palace, forth I tread,
With hands shrill-clapped, a doleful train,—
Libations bearing to the dead.
Marred is my cheek with many a stain,
Nail-ploughed the furrows bleed,
The while on cries of pain
My heart doth feed.
Rending my flaxen-tissued vest,
With smileless passion, uncontrolled,
Grief doth my sorrow-stricken breast
Dismantle of the garment's decent fold.

For shrill, hair-bristling Fear,
Of Atreus' home dream-prompting seer,
Breathing forth rage in sleep,—at dead of night,
From the recesses of these royal halls,
Rang out a cry of wild affright
That heavy on the women's chambers falls.
And dream-interpreters, in Heaven's high name
To faithful utt'rance pledged, proclaim
That unavenged 'neath earth, the slain
Against their slayers wrathfully complain." *

This is the key-note of the earlier part of the play: this is the fear which hangs over our minds. This fear has led the queen to send forth this mourning procession, as if she might so appease the wrath of her murdered lord. But blood, says the Chorus, cannot be washed out; Atè will exact her penalty without mercy.

* For the translations throughout this and the following play the writer is indebted to Miss Swanwick's "Trilogy of Æschylus."

Then Electra speaks to the Chorus. How, she asks, can I fulfil my task, and offer these libations to my father? I cannot say, "These are a loving wife's gifts to her husband." Shall I pray that she who sent them may be requited?

> "Or, with no mark of honour, silently,
> For so my father perished, shall I pour
> These vain oblations to the thirsty earth,
> Then, tossing o'er my head the lustral urn,
> (As one who loathèd refuse forth has cast,)
> With eyes averted, back retrace my steps?"

The Chorus bids her accompany the offerings with good wishes for the righteous—for herself, that is, and all who hate Ægisthus—and for Orestes her exiled brother, and pray that on the guilty some god or mortal may come in vengeance. All this is dimly and gradually suggested, and then Electra prays. In perfect beauty she stands before us, sorrow mingled with righteous anger, and prays to the gods below and mother Earth, and to her father's spirit, that they may pity her slavish lot and bring home Orestes from his exile, and that her father's murderess may be justly slain. Then solemnly she ascends the steps of the tomb and pours out the libation, while the Chorus sings a short hymn of grief for the lost warrior. Suddenly Electra's white arm is raised, the dark folds of her dress falling off from it, for she has found upon the tomb her brother's votive lock, and now holds it up in wonder to show it to the Chorus. They cannot guess from whom it comes, but the truth quickly

dawns upon the sister's mind. The hair is like her own in colour; Orestes is the only friend who could be so lamenting Agamemnon; footsteps, too, are to be seen leading to the tomb, which in length and shape tally exactly with her own. While she is disturbed and uncertain, hoping but hardly daring to believe, Orestes comes forward and addresses her. She does not know him, and even when he tells her who he is, thinks he is mocking. But when at last she is convinced, her gladness overflows; he shows the very cloak which her hands had wrought; she falls upon his neck, and thus addresses him:—

"Oh! cherished darling of thy father's house,
Hope of our race, thou precious seed, long wept,
Trusting in thy strong arm, thou shalt regain
Thy natal home. O fondly loved, in whom
Centre four dear affections; for perforce
Thee must I hail as father, and on thee
Love for my mother, justly hated, falls;
And for my sister, pitilessly slain.
My faithful brother hast thou ever been,
My pride, my awe;—only may Justice, Strength,
With Zeus supreme, third Saviour, aid thy cause."

Orestes joins in her prayers, and explains how Apollo himself has sent him to execute this purpose, recounting the calamities which would fall on him if he should refuse the service: how Atè would pursue him; how every share in festal cup or sacred rite would be denied him, till, friendless and dishonoured, he must die with all the burden of his guilt upon him. Such oracles he cannot disobey. The avenger has

announced his resolve, and the Chorus solemnly approves it. "Doer of wrong must suffer,"—this is the grand old law.

The course of the action being so clearly marked out, it is now to be still further sanctioned by appeals to Heaven, and our interest in it heightened by hearing it dwelt upon, with every variety of treatment, by the two persons engaged upon it. Orestes stands on one side of the tomb, Electra on the other, and just below the Chorus is grouped, to bear part in their alternate song:—

"*Ores.* What can I, Sire unblest,
Prayerfully sing,
Thee from thy couch of rest
Hither to wing?
Lo! in that drear confine,
Darkness is day!
Vainly to Atreus' line
Honours we pay!

Cho. My son, the wasting jaws of fire
Quell not the spirit of the dead,
Full late he manifests his ire.—
When mourned is he whose blood is shed,
The slayer is revealed. In time,
For slaughtered parents, righteous wail
Poured forth unceasing, doth avail
To track the crime.

Elec. In turn, my tearful strain,
O Father, hear!
Hark how thy children twain
Chant anthems drear!

Exiles beside thy tomb,
Sad, suppliant pair ;—
No hope relieves our gloom,
Triumphs despair.

Cho. And yet, if so the gods ordain,
Hereafter, gladder notes shall sound ;—
Instead of dirge, joy's rapturous strain
Back to these halls shall lead again
The dear one newly found."

So many times they answer one another, grief by turns taking the place of hope ; the tone sinking sometimes almost to despair, sometimes rising to prophetic exultation ; and throughout it all they call their father, as the Persians called Darius, to come forth from his tomb, and help them to revenge. Gradually the tones grow calmer and more determined ; till they settle down, when the resolve is fully ratified, into the sober language of the ordinary dialogue. Then the Chorus says,—

" Unblamed in sooth have ye your speech prolonged,
Due to his tomb, and unlamented fate.
But since to action now thy soul is braced,
To work forthwith ! and in the god confide."

Yet even now the fixed resolve is to be strengthened by an omen of success. " Why," asks Orestes, " has the queen sent these offerings to the tomb, seeing that she cannot hope by any sacrifice to wash out the stain of murder ?—for, as the saying runs, not all the world, poured out in one libation, could atone for one man's blood."

The Chorus answers him. It is a dream that has made her anxious. She dreamt that she gave birth to a dragon, who fed with his savage jaws at her own breast. She sprang up in terror, and could not rest till these libations had been sent to her husband's tomb. Even to Clytemnestra remorse has come at last, and conscience makes her connect every terror with her crime. She could not know what this dragon meant, but Orestes accepts it as a type of himself :—

> " For if the snake, quitting the self-same womb,
> Was girded straightway with my swathing-clothes,
> And, gaping round the breast that nourished me,
> Sucked with my nurture-milk the clotted blood,
> While she in terror, at the portent shrieked ;—
> Needs must it be, that she who reared the pest
> A forceful death must die. I, dragon-like,
> Myself shall slay her, as her dream declares."

No more is needed to strengthen his resolution or to sanction it, and now he unfolds the details of his plot. With the faithful Pylades, who has never left his side, he is to present himself as a stranger at the gates of the palace, and so to gain admission to the presence of Ægisthus. Then, so soon as he sees the usurper, he will kill him. Such is his plan. Of his mother he says not a word. That intention is too dreadful to be spoken of : though unhesitating in his determination, he will not utter it, even to his friends. Surely there is something very touching and dreadful in this silence.

Orestes and Pylades go away into the fields, to

reappear in their new character, and Electra enters the palace. The time of vengeance is close at hand: who does not tremble? The Chorus gives expression to the universal apprehension in a fine and simple ode. They sing of the terrible extremes to which human guilt, especially woman's, at times has reached.

"*Cho.* Full many a horror drear
And ghastly, Earth doth rear;—
With direful monsters teems encircling Ocean;
Meteors, with threatening sheen,
Hang heaven and earth between;—
The tempest's wrath still raves with wild commotion;
These, and dire wingèd things, and things that crawl,
Thou mayst describe them all.

Strophe. But man's audacious might
What words can paint aright,
Or woman's daring spirit who may tell?
Her passion's frenzied throes,
Co-mates of mortal woes?
For love unlovely, when its evil spell
'Mong brutes or men the feebler sex befools,
Conjugal bands o'errules."

Then they recite the past crimes of women—Althæa's, who burnt the brand on which her son Meleager's life depended; and Scylla, who for a golden necklace sold her father's life; and, worse than all, of the Lemnian women who slew their husbands, and made the name of Lemnos a byword for atrocity. But justice, they cry, is unerring in her aim, and her throne is immovable.

" Firm based is Justice ; Fate of yore
Forged weapon for the blow;
Deep-souled Erinnys doth restore
Th' avenger to his home, and, lo !
He pays the bloody score."

And now the conspirators are come, Orestes and Pylades, with attendants. Orestes walks straight up to the great palace-gates, and knocks repeatedly. A servant at length appears, and goes into the house to fetch some one to hear the stranger's application. Orestes had said,—

" Let one in trust, a woman bearing rule,
Come forth ; yet more decorous were a man.
For when by bashfulness the tongue is swayed
Darkened is speech ;—boldly man speaks to man,
And tells his message forth without reserve."

It is a woman who comes out to answer, and no less a woman than Clytemnestra. With the same unhesitating courage, the same exultant wickedness, with which long ago she boasted of her crime as she stood over her husband's corpse, unchanged she comes out now, and behind her comes Electra. The queen receives the messenger with queenly courtesy. He tells his tale shortly and simply, using the Phocian dialect :—

" *Orest.* From Phocis I, a Daulian, stranger here.—
What time my home I left, for Argos bound,
Starting on foot, with baggage self-equipped,
A man to me unknown, as I to him,
Met me, inquired my route and told me his.
Strophius, the Phocian, as in talk I learned.

'Stranger,' he said, 'since Argos is thy goal,
Say to the parents,'—strictly mark my words,—
'Dead is Orestes;—grave it on thy mind;—
Whether the counsel of his friends prevail
To bring him home, or give him sepulture,
Alien for aye;—bear thou their mandates back;
For now the brazen urn doth shroud from sight
The ashes of the hero duly wept.'
Such words I heard, and tell thee;—if to those
Who here bear rule I speak, kin to the dead,
I know not;—but 'tis meet his sire should know."

"Tis meet his sire should know"!—did Orestes hope to "wring his mother's heart"? It was not "made of penetrable stuff." She says nothing about the dead father, who indeed knows well enough, and in his ghostly power is furthering all this act of retribution; but although the messenger's tidings are, as she pretends to think, not good, yet she admits him with welcome to the house, and goes herself away to tell the news to Ægisthus. Has she some suspicion? Does she go to seek for men to help against any violence which the strangers may intend?

Again there is a moment of suspense, during which the Chorus sing a chant of eager expectation:—

"*Cho.*—Dear handmaidens! Sisters dear!
When, oh when, full-voiced and clear,
Shall we, for Orestes' sake,
Loud the joyous pæan wake?"

The hour is come, they say; now must Persuasion lead the guilty ones to offer themselves to the ruin which Erinnys is preparing. As this chorus ends, there

comes out of the palace Cilissa, the old nurse of Orestes; and for some time we are interested and half amused with her garrulous lamentations. It is one of the very few passages where a Greek tragedian has touched that deepest chord of pathos which is struck when we smile at the weakness of human nature, and yet grieve the more for its sufferings; the chord which Shakespeare strikes in Lear and Ophelia, in many of the songs of his clowns, and in the story of Falstaff's death-bed. This old nurse, like her in Juliet, runs on with trifling reminiscences of Orestes' childhood, most unworthy of the occasion, except from this point of view. Still the old woman is made to assist in the execution of the plot. Clytemnestra has sent her to summon Ægisthus, and bid him bring his body-guard with him. This latter message the Chorus bids her not to give, and so it is contrived that the usurper shall offer himself unprotected to Orestes' sword. And so, half guessing from the hints of the Chorus that there is something good going forward, Cilissa goes her way.

Once more the stage is empty, and the loud prayers of the Chorus are heard, as they confidently pray to Zeus for his assistance, and call on Orestes to consummate the deed. Soon Ægisthus comes, half doubting the news, which he pretends to call unwelcome; and he asks the Chorus whether it is true. The Chorus reply:—

> "We have but heard; go thou thyself within,
> Question these strangers;—second-hand reports
> Avail not as to hear the tale one's self."

And he replies:—

"Fain would I see the messenger and learn
Whether himself was present at the death,
Or if from blind report this tale he heard;
A wakeful mind he will not soon deceive."

He goes into the palace. Suspense is at its height.

"*Cho.* Zeus, great Zeus, how frame my cry
Thine aid to win?
How, invoking thee on high,
My strain begin?

For anon with murderous blow,
Either shall the gory blade
Atreus' royal house o'erthrow,—
Prone in dust for ever laid,—
Or in Freedom's sacred name,
Kindling fire and holy light,
Shall the rightful heir reclaim
Wealth and crown,—his twofold right.

Sole against the tyrant pair,
To such deadly grapple hies
Agamemnon's godlike heir;—
None to follow if he dies!
Crown, oh crown, the great emprise!"

A cry is heard; again and again it sounds; and before we have time to doubt, a servant rushes in crying that Ægisthus is slain; and, battering at the door of the women's part of the palace, he calls loudly for Clytemnestra.

She comes hastily forth, knowing instinctively that the hour of her retribution is arrived; but, calling for an axe—the weapon with which she killed Agamemnon—is determined to defend herself to the last. But when Orestes appears, she assumes the guise of tenderness. The avenger says:—

"Dost love this man? With him, in the same tomb,
Then shalt thou lie;—still faithful found in death."

"Hold! hold! my son;" she cries:—

"Revere, my child, this breast
From which, a sleeping infant, thou full oft,
With toothless gums, thy nurture-milk hast sucked."

For one moment Orestes wavers and turns to Pylades, but his friend reminds him of Apollo's command and his own vows, and bids him "choose all for foemen rather than the gods." His momentary hesitation is dispelled. He gives short replies to his mother's pretences of affection, and rejects her excuse with the most solemn answer. She pleads that Fate compelled her to her crime; and Fate, he replies, now ordains her death. He is at least as much the instrument of heaven as she was. Then he drags her into the palace.

While the terrible deed is being done, according to the decorous taste of the Greek theatre, out of sight, the Chorus sings a hymn of unmixed exultation:—

"Reft was I of the sun whose sudden ray
Did with new joy illume
These halls, long sunk in gloom;
It gleamed,—then died away.

Anon, the cheering light,
New-kindled, in these halls shall shine once more,
What time, with lustral rite,
From the polluted hearth is purged the gore,
And Atè put to flight. With form benign,
Fortune, long time an alien, comes to claim
Her home, redeemed from shame.
Clearly the light doth shine!"

No cries are heard this time. The agonies of a mother slain by her own son are too horrible to be even heard. We know the deed is done, and this silence makes the act of solemn justice still more tremendous.

It is done, and the scene is opened; and as we saw Clytemnestra standing in her wicked triumph over the body of her husband, holding in her hand the bloody axe, and pointing to the robe in which her victim had been entangled to be slain,—so now we see Orestes, unhappy but not guilty, standing over his mother's corpse, with his drawn sword in his hand, and pointing to the same robe of Agamemnon in testimony of her guilt. Servants grouped behind him display the long folds of the fatal garment, while Orestes, inspired by the divine justice of which he has been the agent, speaks these solemn words:—

"Behold the tyrants of this land, the twain
My sire who murdered, and this palace reaved.

Majestic once sat they upon their thrones,
United now, as by their fate appears,
And faithful to their pledges e'en in death.
To slay my wretched sire conjoined they swore,
Conjoined to die;—well have they kept their oath.
But further, ye who hearken to these woes,
Mark this device, my wretched father's snare,
His hands which fettered and his feet which yoked.
Unfold it,—form a ring,—and, standing near,
Display the Hero's death-robe, that the Sire,
Not mine, but He who all these woes surveys,
Helios, my mother's impious deeds may mark;
So in my trial, at some future time,
He by my side may stand, and witness bear
That justly I did prosecute to death
My mother;—for of base Ægisthus' doom
Recketh me not;—he, as adulterer,
The lawful forfeit of his crime hath paid."

But calamities are not at an end, as the short cries of the Chorus prophesy:—

"Alas for doings fraught with doom!
Slaughtered he found a gory tomb.
Woe! Woe!
To the survivor grief is but in bloom."

And again:—

"Alas! no son of mortal race,
Unscathed the path of life may trace!
Woe! Woe!
Fadeth one grief, another comes apace."

Already Orestes begins to feel the Furies of his mother coming upon him:—

"As charioteer
With steeds ungoverned, from the course I swerve;
Thoughts past control are whirling me along,
Their captive slave; while terror in my heart
Her pæan and her frenzied dance prepares."

But while Reason yet holds her seat he asserts his righteousness, and pleads the injunction of Apollo. Taking in his hands a suppliant's olive-branch with its festoons of white wool, he turns to go to Delphi, an exile and a wanderer, to seek there the protection of the god he has obeyed. And now he sees the Furies. They rise in the background:—

"Gorgon-like they come,
Vested with sable stoles, their locks entwined
With clustering snakes. No longer may I bide."

And though the Chorus cannot see them, they press round him more closely and more hideous; his frenzy grows, and covering his face with his hands he rushes in madness from the place.

The Chorus still bless him, and pray that he may obtain protection, and march back up the steps across the stage, and through the palace-gates, chanting this song:—

"Thrice the Atridan storm hath burst
O'er Mycenæ's halls.
Child-devouring horror first
Brooded o'er these walls.
Next a king's disaster came,
When the chief who led
Hellas' warriors, known to fame,
In the bath lay dead.

Now, behold a third is come,—
Saviour, shall I say, or doom?
From what quarter sped?
Full-accomplished, when shall Fate,
Lulled to rest, her stormy ire abate?"

In our sympathy for Orestes thus suffering for his piety, we cannot but look forward with eager expectation to the next Play, in which we are to see him delivered from the Furies. But there is another reason, even more powerful, to make the Athenian citizen wait impatiently for the "Eumenides." A rumour has got abroad that Æschylus is going to use all the interest which his great Trilogy must awaken to support a political cause. The leaders of the popular party, Pericles and Ephialtes, are proposing to reform, if not to abolish, the high court of Areopagus. This venerable court has been hitherto in the hands mainly of the nobility, and wields an authority all the more extensive because it is undefined; it is the highest tribunal in cases of murder and sacrilege, and a peculiar sanctity is attached to its decisions. Some, however, of the citizens think, it seems, that it is old-fashioned and unwieldy; and perhaps even that it may become the stronghold of a selfish nobility, who, by straining to the utmost its undefined prerogatives, may make it the means of a formidable opposition to the system of reform which is in progress. Others regard it with the reverence which they conceive to be due to an institution founded by the gods, and intimately con-

nected with the greatness of the city; and among these, we need hardly say, is Æschylus. He intends, by representing the court of Areopagus as the scene of the trial and liberation of Orestes, and as having been founded at that time by Pallas—and not only for that occasion, but for ever—to enlist the sympathy of every pious Athenian on the side of the ancient assembly, and against Ephialtes and Pericles, and the democratic movement which they represent.

Such is the expectation which makes our neighbours in the theatre particularly impatient for the "Eumenides"; though little can be needed to heighten the enthusiasm with which the climax of so deeply interesting a Trilogy will be received. We have seen the crime committed against the father of Orestes, we have seen his solemn act of vengeance, and we have seen that even the righteousness of his cause could not deliver him from the Furies of a mother slain. These Furies have pursued him through many lands, and made his life a misery, until at last he has reached Apollo's shrine in Delphi, and even thither his torturers have pursued him.

But suspense is at an end: the curtain falls, and we are in Delphi, the centre of the world, the very home and source of sanctity and truth. Before us rises the high temple-front, and outside it stand statues of all those Powers which, according to old mythology, have held sway in turn in this most holy place. In prayer before these statues is seen the priestess of the temple;—she whose utterances are oracles; she who awards to the whole Grecian world—yes, and to barbarians too—all

that they have of revelation. First in her prayer is mentioned Earth, the primeval prophetess; then Themis, who next held the sacred seat; then Phœbe, another daughter of Earth, who gave to Phœbus Apollo his office and his name. Having done due honour to the local deities, the priestess calls on Pallas, and Bacchus, and Poseidon, and on Zeus, and then enters to take her seat upon the inspiring tripod, that she may give responses to any who may consult the god. And so she goes through the great folding-doors into the temple. Very few of mankind have entered that sacred chapel: there hang the offerings of great kings and sages, who have, during ages past, gained answers from Apollo; there the bright god himself vouchsafes his special presence; there is the Omphalos, or navel-stone, which is believed to be the very centre of the earth.

But the priestess rushes forth again in an agony of terror. She has seen a portentous sight, for at the Omphalos itself a man is sitting in suppliant guise;

> "His hands still dripping gore,
> His sword new-drawn, his lofty olive-branch
> With ample fillets piously enwreathed,
> White bands of wool;"

and behind him is a wondrous company of women sleeping—or rather, women they cannot be called, for no gorgons nor harpies are so hideous. The sound of their breathing, the loathsome aspect of their faces, and the filthiness of their dress, all combine to make their very presence a pollution to a temple, or even to the

roofs of men. As soon as the terrified priestess has described all this, the scene opens and we see it for ourselves. In the inner sanctuary of the temple is Orestes sitting on the Omphalos, and by him stands Apollo; while behind them, in a semicircle, the Furies are asleep, and quite in the background stands Mercury or Hermes, the escorter of the dead. Apollo speaks:—

"Never will I betray thee: to the end
I guard thee, standing near, or far aloof;
Nor will be gracious ever to thy foes.
And captured now this maddened crew thou seest.
By sleep the loathsome virgins are o'erpowered,
Hoary primeval progeny,—with whom
Nor god, nor man, nor beast, will e'er consort.
For Evil's sake brought forth, in evil gloom
Of subterranean Tartarus they dwell,
Abhorred of men and of the Olympian gods.
But hie thee hence, nor e'er relax thy speed,
For as thou tread'st the wand'rer-trampled earth,
They'll track thee o'er the ample continent,
O'er the wide ocean and the citied isles;
And thou, faint not too early, o'er thy grief
Brooding alone; but haste to Pallas' walls,
And suppliant, her ancient image clasp.
There judges we shall have to try this cause,
And soothing words: so means we shall devise
For evermore to free thee from these toils;
For at my bidding was thy mother slain."

Orestes prays his patron to hold to his promise; and Apollo bids him not to fear, and intrusts him to Hermes to be escorted to Athens, the city of Pallas.

The victim is gone, and the pursuers are still asleep,

for indeed in the halls of Apollo such angry powers cannot easily be awake. But are they to remain indifferent? Is a mother slain to lose the satisfaction which her murderer owes? Rather than this, she comes herself to stir up the executors of her vengeance. From the inner part of the temple, clad in dark robes, with her bare neck still showing the wound that her son inflicted, arises the ghost of Clytemnestra; and with bitter reproaches she urges the Furies, by gratitude for the gifts she has offered them, by their own honour lost if he escape, to pursue the matricide. Her words are not unheard. They wake slowly with hideous groans and mutterings; and at length, crying like hounds to one another, the savage note running round the semicircle, they rouse them gradually to their task. As they awake, the ghost again and constantly repeats her exhortations, till, when they are thoroughly excited to renew their chase, she vanishes away. Thus it is that the energy of these cruel powers may always, by the will of those on whose behalf they act, be quickened against the guilty or the representative of a guilty race; just as conscience, ever and anon calling up remembrance of a crime, stirs in a sinner's breast the tortures of remorse. At last, each waking her neighbour, they all start up, and, ranging themselves in chorus-fashion on the stage, utter their angry expressions of baffled rage and disappointment; especially complaining of the arrogance of Apollo, who has dared, an upstart god, to trample on their ancient prerogatives. But Apollo stands up, wrathful and beautiful, his silver bow bent in his hand, as when he slew the Python,

and bids them, as they fear his arrows, carry their detested presence from his hallowed temple.

They rejoin with accusations of Apollo, for that he is the sole cause of all the trouble, having urged Orestes to the act of matricide and promised him protection; while they plead the righteousness of their own position as the appointed pursuers of all who have done such deeds. When it is shown that the mother, whom Orestes killed, was herself the murderess of her husband, the Furies answer that that guilt is less, because a husband's blood is not the blood of kindred. The god replies that by such a theory all marriage right is set aside; Jove and Juno, the wedded king and queen of heaven, are dishonoured; and the goddess of love is set at nought. But they cannot be convinced, and the pursuers and the protector part with mutual defiance.

A short interval ensues, during which the scene is changed. Instead of the Delphian sanctuary of Apollo, the high front of Minerva's temple on the Acropolis forms the background. We are in Athens itself at last: no less a city can be the place for the great consummation. Clasping the sacred image of the goddess, Orestes sits and calls on her to grant him her protection, since the pollution of his crime, if such it be, has been worn off by many sacrifices and many prayers, and now with clean hands, at Apollo's bidding, he comes to abide at her decision the issue of his cause. But his foes are close upon his track. They enter now from beneath the stage in front, and rank themselves in the orches-

tra; and as they come, looking about for their victim, their leader says,—

"'Tis well; sure token this, the man is here.
Follow the leading of this voiceless guide;
For still we track, as hound the wounded fawn,
By blood and reeking drops, our destined prey;
With many a toilsome man-outwearing gasp
Pant my deep vitals, for on every spot
Of the wide earth my charge I shepherded,
And now, in hot pursuit, with wingless flight,
Swift as swift galley o'er the sea I course;
Here in some nook ensconced the game must lie;
With keenest joy I snuff the scent of blood."

Then in lyric strains they exhort one another to the search, and when they see the suppliant at the goddess's side, they repeat their threats of vengeance. Again Orestes speaks, and a noble calmness and confidence pervades his words. "Pale now," he says,—

"Pale now, and dim, the blood-mark on my hand;
Washed clean away the matricidal stain;"

and now with pure lips I pray to Pallas to come from her distant dwelling by the Lybian Lake of Trito, or from whatever spot may hold her, "and be my saviour from those miseries." The Chorus of Furies defy his prayers. He is their victim, and no god shall save him, and they sing their Binding Hymn which will make him fully theirs. Anything more terrible than the intense malignity of this ode it is difficult to imagine. The witches in Macbeth around the fatal cal-

dron are awful from their weird grotesqueness; these Furies, as they dance with every gesture of greedy hatred, are even more awful in their solemn determination.

Choral Hymn.

"Haste we now the dance to wind,
Since beseems in dread refrain,
To utter how our bodeful train
Deal the lots to mortal kind.
Loyal are we to the Right,—
Hence clean hands whoso extendeth,
Scathless still through life he wendeth,
Nor on him our wrath may light.
But who guilty hands doth hide,
Stained with blood,—as yonder wight,—
Lurketh ever at his side,
Witness true, this Brood of Night.
Blood-avengers we appear,
Stern-purposed to achieve our doom severe.

Full Chorus.

Oh mother, hear me, Mother Night,
Who brought me forth, a living dread,
To scare the living and the dead,
Latona's son does me despite;—
Stealing away my trembling prey,
Destined a mother's murder to requite.

Now o'er the victim lift the dread refrain,
The Furies' death-hymn, madness-fraught;—
Torch of the brain, from Hades brought,—
Soul-binding, lyreless, mortal-blighting strain.

Antistrophe.

For Fate supreme ordains that we
This office hold for evermore :—
Mortals imbrued with kindred gore
We scathe, till under earth they flee ;
And when in death
They yield their breath,
In Hades still our thralls they be.

Now o'er the victim lift the dread refrain,
The Furies' death-hymn, madness-fraught ;—
Torch of the brain, from Hades brought,—
Soul-binding, lyreless, mortal-blighting strain."

In answering stanzas they acknowledge and exult in the hatefulness of their office, asserting it with a diabolical confidence which reminds one—if human malice can so nearly approach the hate of deities—of Shylock's deliberate atrocity. And if they remind us of the Jew, so the pure bright being who now appears must remind us of the merciful wisdom, gentle yet determined, of Portia. Minerva comes, like Portia, to defend the righteous man from the apparently legal claims of his cruel enemies. She comes in her warlike beauty, and alights from her chariot, and, holding the long spear in her hand, as the sailor sees her from the far point of Sunium shining in the sunlight on the summit of her temple, stands in the front and speaks :—

"A voice I heard from far Scamander's banks
Invoking me."

And now what do I see? Who are ye, whose forms are not like mortals nor yet like goddesses? and who

is the man who sits as suppliant at my image? The Chorus explain their titles and office; the goddess listens to them all with marked respect, but condemns their unfair attempt to deny Orestes his defence. At last they leave the issue in her hands, and she turns to the defendant:—

"What wilt answer in thy turn,
O stranger? Tell thy country and thy race,
And thy misfortunes, then ward off this blame;
If, trusting in the right, thou thus dost sit
Clasping mine image, near my sacred shrine,
Ixion-like, a suppliant revered,
To all of these make answer clear to me."

His answer is dignified and clear:—

"Athena, queen! matter of grave import
First will I from thy words last-uttered purge.
Not blood-polluted am I, nor doth stain
Cleave to thine image from thy suppliant's hand.
Sure proof of this I will adduce;—'tis law
That voiceless lives the man defiled by blood,
Till purifier's hand hath him besprent
With victim's blood, slain in life's budding prime.
Long since at other shrines have been performed,
With victims and with streams, these lustral rites.
Thus then this care, as cancelled, I dismiss.
My lineage, what it is, thou soon shalt hear.
Argive am I, my sire thou knewest well,
Marshal of naval heroes, Agamemnon,
In league with whom thou madest Ilion,
Troya's proud city, an unc[illegible]tied waste.
The hero home returned, and basely fell;
For him, entangled in a subtle net,

My mother, black of soul, did reave of life;
The bath bore witness to the deed of blood.
Myself, long time an exile, coming home,
Slew her who bare me,—I deny it not,—
Avenging my dear father, blood for blood.
But Loxias* is sharer in my guilt
Who goads of anguish to my heart announced,
Unless the guilty found from me their due.
My deed, or just, or unjust, do thou judge;—
Whate'er thy verdict, I shall be content."

Minerva shrinks from taking on herself the weight of the decision, fearing to enrage the Furies against her land if she reject their suit, fearing to wrong a suppliant if she grant their claim; and so she founds a court:—

"But since this weighty cause hath lighted here,
Judges of murder, bound by oath, I'll choose,
Solemn tribunal for all future time.
But for yourselves call witnesses and proofs,—
Sworn evidence collect to aid your suit;
Myself the noblest of my citizens,
To whom is dear the sanctity of oaths,
Will cull; then hither come to judge this cause."

The Chorus now renew their chant, and set forth at length the evils that will ensue if in this case their victim escapes. No crime will then be restrained; then men will call in vain on Justice or Erinnys, the only powers who can keep men guiltless and happy. If Awe dwells in the heart, the man may live well, safe from excesses; but he who is careless and knows not

* Apollo—so named from the ambiguity of his oracles.

Fear will spurn with atheist foot the altar of Justice, and meet with certain retribution.

Strophe.

"But who unforced, with spirit free
Dares to be just, is ne'er unblest;
Whelmed utterly he cannot be:
But for the wretch with lawless breast,
Bold seizer of promiscuous prey,—
I warn you,—he, perforce, his sail
Shall strike amid the conquering gale,
When shrouds and yards dismasted own its sway."

Antistrophe.

"He cries, but 'mid the whirlpool's roar
None heeds him; for the gods deride
Eyeing the boaster, proud no more,
Struggling amid the surging tide;
Shorn of his strength he yields to Fate;—
The cape he weathers not, but thrown
On Justice' reef, with precious freight,
He perisheth for aye, unwept, unknown."

As this ode is ended the scene is changed again, and we are on Mars Hill, the Areopagus itself; and Pallas enters at the head of twelve Athenian citizens, the judges of the new tribunal. In that vacant space upon the floor of the theatre, in the centre of which the altar stands, these Areopagites take their places, sitting in semicircle just inside that lowest range of the spectators' seats on which are the magistrates of Athens. They are not separated far from the spectators; for in this grand final scene the whole Athenian

people are to be taken into the action, and act as judges with the Areopagites. Before them is the altar, on which two urns now stand to receive their votes, and between the altar and the stage the Chorus of Furies is drawn up. Pallas stands on the stage, and by her side a herald; and just as the trumpet's note, when "the king drinks to Hamlet," quickens our senses for the Shakespearian catastrophe, so now the trumpet rings through the Theatre of Bacchus, and summons all, spectators as well as actors, to take their share in the trial of Orestes. The goddess cries,—

> "Herald, proclaim! Hold back the multitude,
> Let Tuscan trumpet, filled with mortal breath.
> Piercing the welkin with sonorous blast,
> Ring out its brazen summons to the crowd:
> For, this tribunal seated, it befits
> Silence should reign; so this assembled town
> Shall learn the laws I sanction for all time,
> So may this stranger's cause be fairly judged."

So now Apollo enters, and the pleading begins. The Furies examine Orestes closely, and he admits the crime, but justifies it, and ends by calling on Apollo. The god pleads his suppliant's cause, and shows, in answer to the Chorus, that the tie which binds a man to his father is even closer than the mother's, since a child can be born without a mother, as Pallas was herself, who sprang full-armed from the head of Olympian Zeus. Before the votes are given Pallas charges the court, and her words are meant for the assembled citizens of Athens:—

"Hear ye my statute, men of Attica,—
Ye who of bloodshed judge this primal cause;
Nay, and in future aye shall Ægeus' host
Revere this great tribunal. This the hill
Of Ares, seat of Amazons, their tent,
What time 'gainst Theseus, breathing hate, they came,
Waging fierce battle, and their towers upreared,
A counter-fortress to Acropolis;—
To Ares they did sacrifice, and hence
This rock is titled Areopagus.
Here then shall sacred Awe, to Fear allied,
By day and night my lieges hold from wrong,
Save if themselves do innovate my laws.
If thou with mud, or influx base, bedim
The sparkling water, nought thou'lt find to drink.
Nor Anarchy, nor Tyrant's lawless rule
Commend I to my people's reverence;—
Nor let them banish from their city Fear;
For who 'mong men, uncurbed by Fear, is just?
Thus holding Awe in seemly reverence,
A bulwark for your state shall ye possess,
A safeguard to protect your city-walls,
Such as no mortals otherwhere can boast,
Neither in Scythia nor in Pelops' realm.
Behold! This court august, untouched by bribes,
Sharp to avenge, wakeful for those who sleep,
Establish I, a bulwark to this land.
These warnings to my lieges I address,
To unborn ages reaching. Judges, rise,
Assume the pebbles, and decide the cause,
Your oath revering. All hath now been said."

Now one by one the judges rise and drop their votes alternately into each urn, while between each Apollo and the Chorus utter in turn two lines of warning and

appeal. When the last judge has resumed his seat, Pallas herself, still standing on the stage, holds up a voting-pebble and speaks thus :—

"With mè it rests to give the casting-vote,
And to Orestes I my suffrage pledge.
For to no mother do I owe my birth;
But I, in all save wedlock, praise the male.
In very truth I am my father's child,
Nor care I to avenge a woman's death
Who slew her husband, guardian of the house.
Orestes, judged by equal votes, prevails,
The pebbles now pour quickly from the urns,
Judges, to whom this office is assigned."

While the votes are counted Orestes and the Chorus express in turn their anxiety and suspense. At last the goddess thus declares the verdict :—

"Orestes has escaped the doom of blood,
For equal are the numbers of the votes."*

With eager eloquence Orestes pours out his thanks to Pallas, and promises the eternal friendship of his city to Athens. He promises this not only in the fiction of the play, but in real earnest, to Athens, here gathered in the theatre; for just now, when this play is being presented, an alliance has been contracted between Argos and Athens. Loud, therefore, is the applause with which his words are greeted :—

* She thus gives her casting-vote, and establishes that principle of Athenian law by which, when the votes were equal, the decision was always declared in favour of acquittal. The casting-vote thus given on the side of mercy was called the "Calculus Minervæ," or "Minerva's pebble."

"Now homeward I depart,
Pledged to thy country and thy lieges here
By oath, to be revered for evermore,
That never helmsman of the Argive State
Shall hither bear the well-appointed spear.
For we, ourselves, though couching in the grave,
On those who violate these present oaths
By sore perplexities will work, and send
Distressful marches, and, with omens dire,
Crossings of streams, till they repent their toil.
But unto those who keep this pledge, and honour
Athena's city with confederate spear,
To them we will be gracious evermore.
Hail, goddess, and these city-wardens, hail!
Still may your gripe be fatal to your foes,
While victory and safety crown your spear."

With this Orestes departs, and the main action of the play is over. The curse is removed, and the house of Pelops is free. But just as we have seen that each sad catastrophe is accompanied with intimations of fresh trouble to come, so this happy ending brings with it a train of blessings.

The Chorus are at first furious with indignation that their ancient power is thus trampled under foot by the younger deities, but gradually, by the mild eloquence of Pallas, they are appeased, and consent to accept a temple and worship in her city; and instead of the curses with which they were threatening the land, to shed forth upon it every blessing. The goddess bids them send good gifts:—

"Such as, with gracious influence, from earth,
From dew of ocean, and from heaven, attend

On conquest not ignoble. That soft gales,
With sunshine blowing, wander o'er the land;
That earth's fair fruit, rich increase of the flocks
Fail not my citizens for evermore,
With safety of the precious human seed;—
But, for the impious,—weed them promptly out,
For I, like one who tendeth plants, do love
This race of righteous men, by grief unscathed:—
Such be thy charge. Be mine not to endure
That, among mortals, in war's mighty game,
Athena's city be not conquest-crowned."

And in a new strain they sing:—

"Pallas, thy chosen seat be henceforth mine!
No more the city I despise
Which Zeus omnipotent and Ares prize,
Altar of refuge, glorious shrine,
Stronghold of Grecian deities,
For which, propitious, now I pray,
Pouring my sacred lay;
Springing to light from earth's dark womb,
May life's fair germs prolific bloom,
Lured by the solar ray.

. . . . . .

Here may no tree-destroying mildew sweep,—
(So show I forth my grace,)
May no fierce heat within these bounds alight,
Blasting the tender buds; no sterile blight,
Disastrous, onward creep.
But in due season here may flocks of worth
Twin yeanlings bear; and may this race,
Enriched with treasures of the earth,
Honour the Heaven-sent grace!"

Converted thus into kind deities,* Eumenides henceforth instead of Furies, they are led forth in cheerful procession to their temples under the Acropolis. Pallas goes in front to show them to their dwelling; behind them the twelve judges follow, and last a train of women march with blazing torches. Up the broad steps that lead from the orchestra to the stage, along the whole front of the theatre, the stately procession moves, and passes slowly out of sight to go to the crypts in whose gloomy sanctity these daughters of the night are worshipped. And as they go, the escort-hymn is sung:—

Chorus of the Escort.

"Night's hoary children, venerable train,
With friendly escort leave the hallowed fane.

All. Rustics, glad shouts of triumph raise.

Cho. In ancient crypts remote from light,
Victims await you and the hallowed rite.

All. People, ring out your notes of praise.

Cho. With promise to this land of blessings rare,
Down the steep path ye awful beings wend,
Rejoicing in the torch-light's dazzling glare.

All. Your cries of jubilee ring out amain.

* The title is really due to that dislike of the Greeks to calling unpleasant things by their true names, which made them call the Black Sea the Euxine, or "Hospitable Sea."

Cho. Let torch-lights and libations close the rear.
Thus Zeus, all-seeing, and the Fates descend,
To bless these citizens to Pallas dear.

All. Your cry of jubilee ring out amain."

And so it is all over. Very dimly and scantily the scenes have been represented here: we have had but half the play, even in this meagre English; and we have lost altogether the beauty of colouring, the grandeur of the music, and, above all, the sympathy of assembled Athens. But even thus we can hardly wonder if the consent of posterity has given the palm for artistic greatness to the Trilogy of Orestes.

Let us look back for a moment at the scenes that have passed before us, from the watchman on his tower in the lonely darkness, to the blaze of torches that has just parted from our gaze. Let us see Agamemnon coming home in pride, Cassandra in the storm of her wild emotion, Clytemnestra defying the elders of her country; watch, again, Electra with her train of captives bringing their offerings to the dead hero's tomb; Orestes in his unswerving course of vengeance — not Hamlet-like, pondering and regretting, but going straight though sadly to his task; see him driven in madness forth; recall Apollo standing angry with his bow, the hideous Furies chanting their Binding Hymn, bright Pallas holding up the acquitting pebble, Orestes going forth freed and rejoicing;—

has it been so dry and lifeless after all, this Greek story?

And if we could see it as they saw it, under the Athenian sky, and feel as they felt then, to whom its religious meaning was a creed, to whom the Argive alliance was a real interest, and the Areopagus a cause to fight for, should we have needed any apology for Æschylus?

END OF ÆSCHYLUS.

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